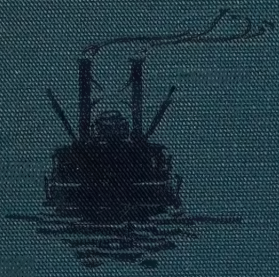
ALL ABOARD



by

IRVIN S. COBB

All Aboard

Saga of the Romantic River

All Aboard

Saga of the Romantic River

by Irvin S. Cobb

Author of

"Chivalry Peak," "Speaking of Operations," etc.

Cosmopolitan Book Corporation

New York, MCMXXVIII

Copyright, 1927, 1928, by
IRVIN S. COBB

All rights reserved, including that of translation into foreign languages, including the Scandinavian

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

To

Charles A. Penn, Esq.

CONTENTS

I—*A Prelude—But Mercifully a Short One* 1

II—*The Steamboat That Got Religion* 4

III—*How She Came to Be Converted* 18

IV—*As Brands from the Burning* 22

V—*But No Dam Yankee* 36

VI—*The Second Battle of Shiloh* 49

VII—*Cupid and Hymen and Old Major Todd* 59

VIII—*The Prayin' Mate* 70

IX—*The Ghost of Slew-Foot Willie* 81

X—*Faith with Works* 87

XI—*The Injun Duel* 96

XII—*On Snake-Bit Island* 107

XIII—*Wool Hat Strategy* 113

XIV—*Trouble on the June Rise* 121

XV—*Cap'n Tip January, Diplomat* 130

XVI—*The Other Cheek* 140

XVII—*An Episode at Pintail Lake* 148

XVIII—*Murder as a Fine Art* 157

XIX—*The Crippled Undertaker* 170

XX—*Introducing Mr. Red Ham Gravy Jones* 179
XXI—*Stranger Things Have Happened* 191
XXII—*Would Anybody Believe It?* 201
XXIII—*Low-Combed Roosters* 211
XXIV—*Bland Mr. Bland* 225
XXV—*The Sanctified Buzz Saw* 232
XXVI—*A Plot Against Our Government* 238
XXVII—*Liars All* 248
XXVIII—*Sweet Tooth* 257
XXIX—*Hell and High Water* 263
XXX—*The Spite Fence* 279
XXXI—*Speaking of Miracles* 283
XXXII—*The Mud Clerk* 288
XXXIII—*True Love and a Cyclone* 296
XXXIV—*Benny Dozier Up and Quits* 307
XXXV—*In the Year of the Big Freeze-Up* 314
XXXVI—*The Promised Land* 324
XXXVII—*"Another Old-Timer Goes Ashore"* 330

All Aboard

Saga of the Romantic River

ALL ABOARD

CHAPTER I—*A Prelude—But Mercifully a Short One*

THERE is one river among the southwestern rivers, which until very lately has continued to be much as it was in the olden days. That's the Tennessee River. In a way, it is a paradox—you go up it to go down. That is to say, the farther you travel up-stream the farther you get down-country into the heart of the South.

Starting against current, you cut through one end of Kentucky—the lower end—and you cross the state of Tennessee from top to bottom in a deep curve, and you skirt a nub of Alabama and shear a corner of Mississippi, and then your winding course brings you back to Tennessee again; to eastern Tennessee now, where the headwaters, which come mainly out of the North Carolina mountains, are merging together, tributary by swift-running tributary.

In all its length it has but two really sizable cities on its banks—Chattanooga at the head of its steam navigation, Paducah at its mouth. But there are dozens of small interior towns, and hundreds of remote woody landings along its shores. Railroads cross it, but no railroad accompanies it for any considerable distance;

and this helps to explain why steamboats still ply it regularly and why on it there may yet be found the steamboating life, the steamboating adventures, the steamboating characters and types which almost have vanished elsewhere.

These surviving steamboats are not the lordly deep side-wheelers of the ancient times on larger rivers, with their uniformed crews and their black orchestras and their curved big paddle-boxes. They are long, limber, flat-bottomed stern-wheelers, modest as to equipment, smart as hucksters to pick up trade, patronized and manned by a peculiar and distinctive people.

These craft ply a beautiful blue river, which runs through a very beautiful and an almost unspoiled country. The Cumberland, which parallels it, is green, and the Ohio into which it empties is yellow; but except in flood-times it is blue. If there is a Romantic River left, it's this one.

But times change, are changing very fast while this story-book is being written. Where once the imperious river editor ranged the waterfront, a courted guest aboard any boat in port, some ignoble cub reporter scouts for small paragraphs to be printed on an inside page. Where once upon a time, on a busy day—and most days then were busy—the packets lay ranked in double or even triple rows at the wharf, and the wharf throbbed to the pleasant bustle of arrival and unloading and reloading and departure—which was the most exciting part of it all—now the coming or the going of a single boat is an event.

Small oil-burning craft are coming in; steel-hulled freight carriers are talked of. Gasoline launches take short-haul consignments away from the larger, slower

stern-wheelers; motor trucks pilfer a share of the business. The old "lines" of boats, each group under its own central management, are thinning in size; disappearing altogether. Nondescript carriers, independently owned, steal in to fill the gaps, and the crews which operate them are no more like the old-time rivermen than hands on an oil-tanker are like the sailors of Yankee clipper ships.

The Romantic River, as such, is on its last legs.

CHAPTER II—*The Steamboat That Got Religion*

IT was a mighty hard call for the Emma Katie Lucas to be making. The Tennessee was up and ramping. She was away up and away out; she was over her banks and wide-spread through the lowlands, and the regular landing here at Snake Creek lay somewhere down below under fifteen feet of roily, boily spate. Moreover there had been a cave-in since the rise reached its peak; a crescent-shaped segment of bluff had fetched loose and slid down into the river so that Pluck Sebree, at the wheel, practically had to feel out a new channel for himself as he brought the packet's nosing bow carefully in.

Across the drowned field alongside came a stench of spoilt grain; old man Rumsey back on the bluff had failed to get his stored horse-corn out of the bottoms in time. Only the slab roof of his canted crib showed above the troubled yellow surface yonder, and the stink from it was like a hundred tubs of distillery mash gone suddenly and unpleasantly sour.

"I don't care much for this," stated Mr. Sebree through the open front of his glass-sided cuddy to Captain Bill Lockwood, who stood below and in front of him on the convexed combing of the cindery hurricane roof. "I don't care for this a-tall, I be—be blamed"—he said "blamed" but with a painful effort—" if I do!"

"Ease her in slow, Mr. Sebree, ease her in slow,"

counseled the anxious master. "We've got to get Rumsey's jag of goods off, whether or no. Had to tote it on past, the trip going up, you remember, account of it's being flood-stage; and just for that old Rumsey waded out and found a stray telegraph line somewheres back in the woods and wired to Sheffield and just naturally raised hell—er, Heligoland!" With his presence of mind functioning, he swiftly tamed his speech. "Yes suh, that's what he raised—Heligoland. Perishable stuff 'tis mostly, including some sacked Irish potatoes that got wet and've already went to sprouting. Work her in gentle and I reckin you can make it."

Pluck Sebree, that smart navigator, was working her in so, edging along a foot at a time. The freshet having slightly receded from its crest, the raw earth on his left showed in a scoured half-moon where the greedy high-water had taken its bite out of Rumsey's acreage. On the right the guards were menaced by the naked top boughs of a dozen or more full-grown pecans and cottonwoods, which had gone sprawling into the current and now slanted this way and that, the more dangerous because their trunks were entirely overwhelmed. The Emma Katie Lucas had to behave herself like a cat slipping into a strange alley. She heaved and shook as the keel slid over some smooth buried danger. The invisible jar of it came all the way up through her thin wooden structures.

"Stiddy, Mr. Sebree, stiddy!" begged Captain Lockwood, bending far over the roof edge, with one fist gripped on a sooty chimney stay. "Cramp her a little bit closer inshore, please. Looks like one of those big limbs is fixing to scrape her forecastle clean."

A salt-water skipper would have called the forecastle

a "fo'c's'le," like that. Captain Lockwood, being what he was, called the fo'c's'le a "forecastle,' as spelt out in the dictionaries.

Mr. Sebree, with one hand jerking the spoke-ends and one foot kicking the big wheel over, reached for and yanked the handles of his signal cords, at the same time shouting into the funneled mouth of the speaking-tube. Engine bells jingled confusingly in the body of the boat.

"What the thunder's a fellow going to do," complained the pestered helmsman, as slowly she answered to the rudders, "with all the marks washed away or covered up? Come on and do like I tell you to!" he harshly bade his balky and reluctant tillers. "I'll be tetotally—"

"Sh-h-h, Mr. Sebree, sh-h," beseeched the captain. "Don't forget what orders is, now."

"Oh—sugar-tits!" growled the pilot into his sandy goatee. "Expect me to handle this hard-headed, top-heavy contrary scow without talking the kind of talk she'll understand? I'm a good mind to quit her, the same as Tip January's doing."

With the air of a fellow sufferer, Captain Lockwood shook his head in silent commiseration. Plainly he also labored under a distressful restraint.

"There you are," he exclaimed after another strained minute. "That's what I call walking a steamboat into a tricky hole!"

"Got to walk her out again—don't overlook that," answered the steersman, but his manner had ceased to be harassed and had become prideful.

With the paddle-buckets of her wheel turning gently to hold her there against the pull of the rough eddy,

the steamer's blunted snout was nuzzling the outer verge of the narrow wooded ridge that ran like a natural dike between the river itself and the stretch of "backwater" inundating the plowed lands on beyond. It was as though she had crawled into ambush—a bulky white pot-hunter trying to squat under the shelter of a skimpy and insufficient duck-blind.

From the lower deck, out of sight of the pilot-house, arose a vasty hoarse bellowing. Second Mate Yarbro was addressing his staff.

"Lively now with that head-line. Hurry, Smoky, hurry! Whut's got into you anyhow, nigger—creepin' paralysis? Waltz yourself on out there and make fast 'fore I take and grab holt of a hick'ry gad and start frailin' you!"

To a shrill squeaking from its agonized gears, the long stage-plank crept out and sank down through a screen of tough, leafless underbrush. Up its steep see-sawy incline a little black man scuttled, agile as a monkey, dragging the bight of a manila hawser which two of his mates paid out to him as he went. The slap of the stage against the shelving bank bounced the line-carrier five feet in the air, but he alighted, running, scrambling, grabbing, on the miry underfooting.

Before he had his coil in loop around a cypress stump, the mud-clerk was jumping ashore, too, and after him followed an out-bound procession of singing, weaving rousters each balancing on his back or shoulder a heavy something—bag of potatoes or firkin of beef or bale of barbed wire or what-not. In a cleared sandy patch past the fringe of saplings and haw bushes, the first pair dropped the burdens they bore and stood by to relieve their fellows as these latter in turn toiled up to

them, then swung and trotted back for yet more parcels. The freight dump grew miraculously, the mud-clerk checking off the tally from his bills of lading and a lank, bearded dweller coming through the bushes to wave a hail to the boat and to accept these belated consignments of his.

Even so, it would seem that the second mate was not satisfied with the rate of speed. Or it may merely have been force of habit which moved him to a rumbling denunciation of the deck force. The weight of his wrath fell on an undersized darky.

"Come on, runty boy—you, the one with that there kag!" he shouted. "Git a move on! Git a move on, else somebody's goin' run over you and tromple you plum' flat. Yes, and that ain't the wust thing's goin' happen to you, neither."

Thus urged, the dwarf took a long step, slipped on the seepy earth and lost his load. It was a small barrel of nails and it rolled toward the water. The hapless rouster overtook it in time, not forgetting though, even in that quick emergency, to hunch his spine and dodge. He knew.

Mr. Yarbro had plucked a lump of coal out of a gaping side-pocket of his overcoat and from where he stood on the boat hurled it with a force and aim remarkable in one of his enormous bulk. It missed the target's cringing head by a margin of inches. Mr. Yarbro had been reared in the country behind the Duck River Sucks and up there they used to go squirrel-hunting with rocks for ammunition. Loudly he deplored his poor aim, then focused his rage upon a third sluggard.

"You *son,*" he proclaimed, "whut d'ye think you're

doin'—sleep-walkin'? Oh, you black *son* that's totin' that crate? You're the one I mean." His voice rose to a choky howl: "And you know whut kind of a black *son* I mean when I call you a black *son!*"

The backing bell sounded and all in a crowded moment the rope had been cast free, the mud-clerk had thrust a sheaf of crumpled manifests into the whiskered native's grasp and had scrambled upon the poised tip of the lifting, swaying stage, with the last two rousters struggling aboard behind him; and at once the Emma Katie Lucas was retreating to open spaces, gouging the soft rain-rotted soil, with the muffled *scrape-scrape* of submerged tree roots along her sides cutting through the labored voice of her 'scaping exhausts.

By way of a glad farewell to Snake Creek and its habitant, Mr. Sebree stepped on a foot-treadle and sent a gush of white steam blaspheming through the whistle-valve, and immediately thereafter the elephantine Mr. Yarbro was glaring hard at the captain, who had come down from aloft, and was seeking to free his mind of some portion of that weight which so perplexed a medium-sized brain and, what was worse, so fettered a fluent and gifted tongue.

"Well, I'll be yaller—" he began, but he never finished the familiar oath which had won for him his common name. For twenty-five years along three hundred miles of this inland water course, he had been "Yaller Dam" Yarbro, wearing his title as a badge of honorable distinction. Now he was only a thwarted and convulsed gentleman with a blazing red face and a throat like a prize bullock's at a county fair. For Captain Lockwood with an uplifted arm had checked him.

"You musn't say it, Yaller," he commanded and glanced about him uneasily. "The boss might hear you —we've all got to be careful."

"But whut'm I goin' to do—tell me that?" raved the mate. "How'm I goin' wrastle this bunch of lazy niggers without I cuss 'em? How's ary one of us goin' help do his sheer at shovin' this yaller—yaller—yallerderned stern-wheeler along without he kin talk natchel?"

"I don't know myself," confessed Captain Lockwood, "but we got to do it some way. It's mighty near as hard on me as 'tis on you. I've been running on the river since I was going on eighteen—twenty-two year on this here one not counting the time I put in on the Lower Ohio and the Cumberland—and this thing has shore got me beat." His tone changed, becoming official. "Stand by with your gang for Ore Valley—that's the next landing and after that we don't stop by anywheres again till we're clear down to Dilday's. Them staves go off there and a bunch of hogs come on."

He stumped aft to take his four o'clock refreshment with the engineer. If you knew your groceries you would have known by your nose that it was four o'clock. All over her, nearly, the Emma Katie Lucas smelled of coffee being brewed. Its aroma came gushing out from the engine-room, since Chief Jobes always made his own jorum from a private canister, he favoring a stronger, blacker mixture than the cooks made; it came forth from the pantry on the level above as a black flunkey served a battery of heavy, handleless cups and cut thick slices of light-bread; and from still higher up it came, where the texas-tender carried a pouring to the pilot-house.

What his afternoon tea is to an Englishman, what

their blubber is to Laplanders, coffee was—still is—to a steamboat man on the southwestern waters of these United States. Paying travelers, if so minded, might share in the potation, but the main thought was for the white members of the crew. At midnight, at daylight, at ten A.M., at four, as stated, and again around nine, the pots must bubble. Of course nearly everybody took coffee also with his three meals a day. The river turned out some magnificent caffeine sots. But this was the marvel of it—that ashore the most confirmed of the topers could do with moderate amounts, that only when afloat did he crave such frequent indulgences.

Mr. Yarbro elected to get his draft, piping hot and heavily sugared, from the pantryman. He wallowed painfully up the forward companionway, which to him was the boiler-deck stair-steps, and so called always. At the top, pausing to take breath, he met Cap'n Tip January, his late associate. But Tip had resigned as first mate; was riding back down-stream as a free passenger bound for the end of the run; and Old Hoss McHovey had signed on at Sheffield for the succession.

Old Hoss would fill the vacancy competently. He would fill almost any imaginable vacancy—a billowy, wheezy giant, in fatness almost but not quite the peer of Mr. Yarbro himself. Mates somehow seemed to run to flesh just as pilots seemed to run to skinniness. But Cap'n Tip was lean as a clothes-pole, as full of angles as a snake-fence, and had hawk's eyes in his head and an eagle beak's nose and black drooping cow's-horn mustaches, a head like a sheep's skull, a chin like a drawn knife. It was as though nature made him to prove the rule by being an exception to it. A hard

man was this Cap'n Tip January, and properly revered from the mouth of the river clear on up to its head for that same hardness and likewise for a certain wicked violence of temper and action.

On yet another count he enjoyed a fearsome repute in every town and at every tiny way-port along the banks. It was one thing to be a rough-living, rough-talking man, a citizen handy with his fists and ready with his gun, a gun which, speaking figuratively, was said to have at least four memorial notches on its butt, three for mutinous rousters and another for a white man. But it was altogether another thing to be an out-and-out unbeliever and a scoffer at religion and an open mocker of dread Deity. Many pious people avoided his company. They didn't want to be there when an outraged Maker blasted Tip January dead in his tracks with fiery thunderbolts. Divine vengeance might make a mistake and include them in the smiting.

With regard to the amazing situation now prevalent on the Emma Katie Lucas, everybody else knew why he was deserting her. Nevertheless, for any sympathetic confrère he stood ready to expound his grievance all over again.

"Couldn't stand it no longer in that infernal cabin," he stated with bitter abruptness, and flirted a bony thumb over his shoulder. "I'd ruther do without my coffee and ride outside, cold as 'tis with this here east'ly wind blowin', than be inside there. Know whut his newest scheme is? Fixin' to turn the bar into a sanctified notions counter and sell gimcracks and ginger cakes and candy—stuff like that—yes, and hymn-books! Heared him say so. Hymn-books! Fixin' before he gits through to turn the whole boat into a floatin'-meetin'-

house. Jest pure craziness, jest pure lunatic madness. Ruinin' a good boat in a good trade because he's went and gone flighty in the head. Well, I'll be shut of her and him both long before this time tomorrow evenin'!"

"You kin afford to be independent," said Mr. Yarbro, "not havin' no wife of your own and no litter of young ones neither. Ef I was fixed like you I don't know but whut I'd act the same way, too. Think of a packet without a bar on her! Seems like I can't git used to the idea. Seems like I never will!"

"You've got more'n that to git used to," said Cap'n January sourly. "That paintin' gang of his has made a whole lot of head-way these last three-four hours whilst you been on watch." He spat copiously over the rail. "Enough to make a grown man sick at his stomach—stickin' up fool mouthin's out of a lyin' book to skeer weaklin's and cowards with."

Although completely in accord with the general tenor of his friend's criticisms, the ponderous Mr. Yarbro winced at that final reference. He knew what book had been meant. It was The Book. Covering up a temporary trepidation, the pachyderm withdrew indoors.

The incredible transformation which had begun before the boat cleared from the home port on the previous Saturday was practically completed, and the person responsible sat on a long-legged stool by the clerk's desk holding a new but already well-thumbed Bible in his gnarled hands. With a keen and reforming eye he supervised the putting-on of a few concluding touches. This was "Commodore" Shep Withers, sole owner of this craft and her sister boats, the Fleetwing and the Linda Smythe, president of a company in which he

held all the stock, the "Big Boss" of a precarious but highly lucrative business.

The look on his gaunt long face was a look of satisfaction. In less than a week much had been done and done to his liking, too. But the work of disciplining an unruly host of underlings—well, that remained yet to be finished. Resolutely it had been undertaken, zealously it had been carried on, ultimately it would prevail. Commodore Withers was as sure of that as he was sure of his soul's salvation. And regarding the last, no man could be surer. Vigilance would do it, indeed was doing it now.

For example, just as Mr. Yarbro entered the long narrow cabin at the "men's end," there issued from a small squad composed of the juniors of the crew—the chief purser's helper, the pilot's cub and the engineer's striker, they being three who generally confabbed together when off duty—a sound which stiffened the commodore through the entire length of his frame. One among the youngsters—it was the mud clerk who so far forgot himself—had tripped over a unit of the plentiful array of big iron-ware cuspidors dotting the floor and had used profanity at the offending vessel; at least he involuntarily had started to use profanity. His utterance began as a full-mouthed solid oath but it was destined to die, half-grown, in a closing throat.

"What's that?" demanded the commodore. "What's that I hear you saying?"

"I didn't go to do it, suh," confessed the abased evil-doer. "It just slipped out unbeknownst. I—I hit my toe on this here ol' spittoon. Honest, suh, I wasn't aimin' to swear, suh. It's—it's jest the way I talk."

"Oh, is it?" The accuser stabbed at him with a

relentless forefinger. "Young man, do you know what the Good Book says about him that taketh His name in vain? No? You say 'No,' do you?" The luckless adolescent had said nothing, though. "Then come over here to me, young man, and stand close by while I find the sacred passage and read it to you. And let this be the last time I have to catch you misbehaving that way, young man."

He looked about him, his fanatic gaze kindling. "Let this be the last time I have to catch any man, boy or even nigger that's working for me on this boat. From this hour thenceforward"—his tone became more heavily Scriptural—"this purged steamboat and all on it belong to Him alone. His humble steward, which is me, will see to it that His commandments are obeyed, letter and deed. Come here, young man, and listen to me while I learn you your lesson, once and for all. And let all the rest of you that're in hearing draw nigh and give heed as well."

That unhappy apprentice, his cheeks a blistered scarlet, stumbled forward, and Commodore Withers, after some searching of the printed leaves, found the place and loudly and sternly he poured the message into the culprit's burning ears.

The place had become in a way a place fitted for such teachings. The surroundings, or anyhow some of them, matched with the sermonizing. In fresh letterings—letters of flame color, of stark bright red, of ominous black—the white surfaces everywhere, on every available space, were blazoned with objurgations from the Prophets and from the Scribes; with sayings from the Singers and the Psalmists of Israel, likewise. But the harsh and merciless admonitions of the ancient

interpreters of the Law far outnumbered an array of gentler, sweeter quotations which had been lifted from the Gospels.

Separate these from those others and you might have gaged shadings and accents of the lately acquired faith of their sponsor. Commodore Withers's theology was shot with fire from everlasting pits and filled with the wailings of mortals eternally and unforgivably lost; it was the old-fashioned kind. But it wasn't so old-fashioned in the day and time wherein these several matters came to pass.

Above the twin entrances, in a sloping scroll, ran a semicircle of frightening words: "The wages of sin is death." Almost equally daunting was the message set forth over the half-front of the clerk's small office: "His days are as a shadow that passeth away." Hard by it against the curving side-wall was this: "The way of transgressors is hard." And next to that: "If a soul touch any unclean thing, he also shall be unclean." And so on and so forth, inscription after inscription.

Every stateroom door on its outer panels as on its inner ones, bore threat or inspired warning or, more rarely, some rapt promise. Near at hand each text stood out clearly distinct, but as the vista of the long narrow enclosure diminished in perspective toward the "ladies' parlor" in the rear and eventually was cut off by the cross-line of the "bureau" at the stern, those more distant scripts ran together and blended to a piebald patterning.

Not since the first of the steam-driven vessels began crowding out the last of the keel-boats from this dependable old Tennessee River had an ark for human beings been so amazingly adorned. Never before in

all this world had there been anything like it. Never again could there be anything exactly like it—barring of course, the Fleetwing and the Linda Smythe. Probably both of these were by now in the same awful state of holiness.

So Mr. Yarbro was mutely saying as he stood a spell by the hot stove and wonderingly looked about him. His eye fell upon a spot almost directly opposite him—the breadth of woodwork framing the late bar at its top. On a short ladder which joggled to the throb of the engines below was perched a stranger in overalls stained like a harlequin's suit, and in the flourishy style of your born sign-painter this person added the final luminous beauteous curlicue to a certain legend.

Mr. Yarbro spelled out the flowing last line, "at the last it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder," and shook a mastodonic head in silent dissent. Under his breath he murmured his protest. "No, suhree," he testified in a whispered undertone, "not a single yaller dam sting in a whole barrel of it, specially ef you taken yours same as I do, in a toddy, with sugar and a leedle water."

And while he was so engaged with his pensive musings, Withers pumped the Testamental facts into that poor child's system, by verse, by chapter, by main force. But down in the gangway descending from one cluttered deck to the next, the unregenerate Tip January stood just beneath a bulkhead which fairly shouted at him: "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God!" and in silent, stiff-necked defiance told his own stubborn heart that the fool had been absolutely right about it.

CHAPTER III—*How She Came to Be Converted*

UPON the Emma Katie Lucas as she rounded to and brought up at the Paducah wharf that Saturday before, her owner had descended like a whirling storm-wind. The stroke had been sudden, without prior warning. On Friday night Withers, moved by no telling what whim, had visited a "tabernacle" tent pitched on a vacant lot at the corner beyond his home. If he went to scoff he remained to pray.

It was as though the preacher had centered his cannonadings upon him; as though the worshipers had sung their rousing hymns for his ears, as though a spiritual high-sheriff laid hold on him at the end of the service and shoved him onward, his feet dragging in the sawdusted aisle, his head bowed, his face all working and streaked with tears, his going marked by a stupefied hush, then by astonished whisperings traveling from row to row of plank seats and then, a great quick shouting of *Halleluiahs* and *Praise Gods* when the elect, against the evidence of their own eyes, forced themselves to realize how noteworthy a brand was being plucked from the burning.

At the mourners' bench the penitent huddled him down and there professed remorse for all his grievous sins, he confessing as many of them as he could, in such a moment, remember offhand, and begged forgiveness, and pledged himself to a life of atonement.

When at last he arose it was to face the jubilant shouting congregation and before them all to voice in broken sentences his new-found happiness and—this, though, with an obvious wrench—to lay upon the altar at the feet of the thrilled revivalists a thank-offering of money larger by a hundred dollars than any yet contributed.

Next morning an entire community vibrated to the news that Shep Withers, that most hard-bitten veteran of all resident steamboaters, had got religion. He got it as he had got all other convictions, all previous prejudices, in his tumultuous bargain-driving career—thoroughly, sincerely, whole-heartedly, and all the way through him and back again.

Afire with his young zeal, he came aboard carrying a Bible, which was absolutely the last object on earth the Emma Katie's astounded crew had ever expected to see their imperious overseer carrying. And the very first thing he did was to summon about him all hands of all colors, white, black, brown and yellow—the unloading had to wait until he was through—and expound for their future conduct, official and private, a set of rules and regulations which were against all river precedent and terribly against all river tradition. And the next thing he did was even more revolutionary, for that was to give orders for dismantling the bar.

At the start it was hard to believe. All proper packets had bars on them and always had had; the commodore himself had begun as a barkeep on the old side-wheeler Indian Queen. Bars paid heavy dividends of profit. How could anybody run a steamboat without a bar?

But they had to believe, although it strained them, when he paid off the two barkeepers and sent them ashore, and with his own hands, while many wistful

eyes grew mournful and many mouths watered, broached kegs and opened bottles and cracked jugs and poured over the sides into the unappreciative waters of the flooding stream whiskies, both Bourbon and rye, and beers and wines and gin—a heavy, foamy, delectable, fragrant torrent of wasted joy-stuffs. About once in a coon's age some straying Yankee, with the curious appetites of his kind, did crave a cordial. So one bottle of cordial went to waste too.

This had been only by way of an inaugural, as witness the present decorations in the redeemed cabin of this boat, which was the flagship of the Withers fleet. The Fleetwing was on the ways at Mound City, undergoing repairs for fractured timbers where a sunken sawlog had rasped her bottom open earlier in the winter. The owner sent two journeymen painters down to her, with copy in their hands and marvelings in their brains.

The Linda Smythe, a twin to the Fleetwing, had been intercepted by other draftsmen up the river, but for the work on the largest boat of his line, the commodore had chosen to ship a squad for the round trip, they to ply their calling under his personal direction while the packet operated. If anybody or everybody back in Paducah wanted any expert lettering done this week they'd have to wait, that was all, for here was a town temporarily drained of its professional artist class.

So now, as the dusk of a drizzly February evening thickened on the river and black duck and mallard flew up from in front of the plodding steamer and wheeled back to settle again in her wake, the commodore sat on his high stool of command and contemplated the accomplished job and was a satisfied man. By the grace

of the Almighty he had been converted. By that same grace, he being its chosen instrument, this beloved possession of his was a convert, too, and for all time hereafter would publicly advertise herself as such. He was glad all over except in one odd corner of his being. There he was sorry.

He was sorry about losing Tip January as first mate —a competent man and a painstaking one. But Tip had quit in mid-journey, giving his reasons therefor. He had spoken frankly. He couldn't stand it to run any longer on such a boat as the Emma Katie Lucas had become. After twelve years of service on her he must get off her and stay off. And Withers, while regretting the loss of such a capable employee, was equally frank to say he couldn't have such a man as Tip on his payroll any longer, either. Still, while accepting its inevitability he secretly couldn't help regretting the severance. Tip had been so knowledgeable about getting the last ounce of man-power out of a bunch of lazy rousters.

CHAPTER IV—*As Brands from the Burning*

IT was getting on to be bedtime for God-fearing people. It was nearly half past ten. Indeed it already was past bedtime for some. From the crew's quarters in the texas issued a rumble of sincere snoring. The kitchen corps had finished with drying the last of the supper pottery, mostly small receptacles curiously like canary birds' bathtubs done in thick chinaware. The cabin—ladies' end and men's end—wore a deserted air. The two black stewardesses had made the double berths in the double row of staterooms, which were as small and almost as frugally furnished as so many cells for monks.

This boat was making good time, all things considered. She was deeply laden, but on the other hand, the tail-end swells of the escaping overflows helped her along here through the lengthened reaches of the lower river, where it somewhat straightened and notably widened for its union with the Ohio. Going up-stream, she would have been hugging the inundated shore-line, keeping under the shoulder of each bend to escape the main opposition of the current; now she stood out to midstream and rode with its swift flowing. A long stretch became a blessing and not a drawback.

Alongside her, the big black lozenge of Twenty-seven Mile Island massed through the intermittent spats of rain. On past its foot a sparse row of lights, hang-

ing low on the inky sky-line like unsupported stars, showed where the railroad bridge crossed. Let her keep up this clip and if so minded she'd make port in the middle of the night. There was no wisdom in that, though. Daylight landings were best.

Withers, taking a turn outside for air, decided to let her lie by somewhere and send her on down after sunup. It was etiquette, it was also river law that the master and not the proprietor should transmit such an order to the pilot. Seeking Captain Lockwood, he made for the office. He wormed his way through narrow lanes of freight; the boiler deck almost was blocked off with it. On the lower deck, as he knew, the rousters had to climb over small mountain ranges of it and the shallow hold was jam-full of mill-stuff. There were twelve first-cabin passengers aboard, too; a fair enough number for this season when travel was light. Commodore Withers warmed with content.

The skipper was not at the office. There being no hurry about transmitting his wishes, the magnate sat down for a brief space by the glowing stove and lighted one of the long black stogies he favored and had talk with Tim Loftus, the watchman, who for the moment chanced to be the only other occupant there. The last yawning passenger had retired. Loftus, with his lighted lantern between his stretched legs, stoked a corncob pipe.

"I trust, Timothy, you are reasonably content with your lot?" said Withers, exercising his newly acquired vocabulary. "And your health—it is good, I hope?"

The watchman was properly flattered. By current marine standards his estate was a humble one. He was not accustomed to inquiries from this source touching

on his general well-being. He enjoyed being so benevolently questioned. "Well, thank you, thank you fur askin'," he answered gratefully. "I ain't got no real complaint. I got my appetite, anyway."

"A good appetite is a blessing indeed," stated his patron. "It is a beautiful world we live in, Timothy."

"Yas, suh, that's practic'ly whut I was sayin' to a feller jest here the other day." romanced Mr. Loftus eagerly. He was no more a hypocrite than the run of us are, but it was good diplomacy to match his manner with the big boss's mood. His voice took on the reverent lowered tone which ordinarily he used only at funerals and in rare and, on his part, entirely unsought interviews with ministers of the gospel: "We oughter all give the Lawd more credit fur whut He's done fur us—that's whut I claim."

"You are right there, Timothy, exactly right," agreed Withers. Somehow he managed to be both prim and hearty in the same breath. "I did not heretofore suspect that you harbored such fine and worthy sentiments."

He pulled at his cigar. His foot tapped on the floor boards to the tremor in them; and the measured drone of the machinery came up through them. Your light-draft western steamboat was a sounding-board, a timber-built kettle-drum; she was a succession of sensitive wooden tympanums set one plane on another. This rhythmic purring and quivering pleased and exalted the owner. It told his trained ear that all below functioned sweetly. She blew for the passage under the bridge just then and the roar of her whistling momentarily deafened them while the steamer trembled all over.

"Timothy," he continued, as the prolonged final blast died away, "the Lord has indeed prospered me here of late, thanks be to Him!" He rubbed his hands together—hands that loved the touch of silver honestly earned. "It's the best trip this boat has had recently. It all goes to show, Timothy, it all goes to show. It shows He is quick to recognize and appreciate the work of His servant's hands. It shows that already He's rewarding my effort to make these boats the only boats on the whole river where a real Christian can feel at home. I have a profound conviction that business is going to get better and better for this line from now on."

The immediate background provided a touch of unintended irony for the zealot's words. Half hidden by his sparse frame was a muraled scroll which read: "Boast not thyself of tomorrow for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth." That same line was to become immediately as the caption for a tragic, graphic picture—the text to a terrifying illustration.

For on the instant, all timed and aptly, like a cue in a play, there occurred the beginnings of a chancy and phenomenal multiplication of piled-on disasters.

Not to be too technical about it, this was what started it, to the sudden tune from the engine-room of a rending, screeching, demoniac clatter which jerked open the eyes of every sleeper aboard her: A worn jib-pin snapped, a cylinder-head cracked, a maltreated piston jammed, practically all together or at least in the same calamitous flash of time, and a pitman, wresting itself free on its forward thrust against steam, became a threshing, smashing timber missile, a dangerous monster instead of an ordered driver, a jockeyless unbridled

wild horse bucking and kicking and plunging in clouds of hot freed vapor.

This was a mishap crippling and costly enough, but not uncommon and not in itself especially serious. It was what almost instantly succeeded that contrived for the Emma Katie Lucas her total undoing. For her fate had decreed it that the dire thing must befall just as the bow passed under the middle arch of the bridge.

Momentarily out of control, she swung away, angling with the strong eddy, to crash broadside on and with terrific impetus against one of the piers. She was never meant for such a buffet; none of her sort ever was. The clouting deeply dented her frame amidships, but that wasn't the worst of it. Under water a flanged buttress of masonry cut into her bottom like a hoe-blade cutting into a brittle calabash. She began sinking but it promised to be a process retarded, since her hold-load of rough-sawed lumber acted as a stay and a buoy.

Taking advantage of a favoring side-twist of current diverted eastward by the bridge structure, her pilot could have guided her before she settled to the comparative safety of shallow waters two hundred yards distant on the left bank. He had her headed so and kept her headed so, scuttled and water-logged though she was, but now, not half a minute after the first disturbance, nor ten seconds after the smack of the collision, a great flare of crimson shot with yellow jets lit up her forward cabin windows. She was afire. She was burning up like a celluloid hair-comb. It was a question whether she would burn up before she sank or sink before she burned up.

The crowning catastrophe had come about through

this fashion. At the first deranged hubbub and clatter from aft and from beneath them, the owner and the watchman were on their feet, startled and alert. Before either could reach the nearest egress there ensued the smash against the stonework. The lurching impact threw them flat.

It threw something else over. There was an iron brace like an inverted long stirrup which anchored the stove fast to the floor. One of the bolts pulled out of its anchorage. The stove went down on its pot-belly and broke apart and a couple of bushels, more or less, of live fuel spilled out; and at that the panic-stricken Loftus scrambled up from his all-fours and snatched for a half-filled tin pail which was standing six feet away against the open-faced cubicle where the bar had been, and never noticing that a collection of paint-brushes was in it also—that in a calmer moment might have told him something—he dashed the contents on the crackling coals.

He and the commodore leaped back from a mounting inferno of flame and fled, with scorched faces and singed hair, through the nearest door and left it open behind them. So now there was a draft to blow the blaze higher.

So far as subsequent inquiry revealed, very few individuals actually lost their heads. The passengers behaved well enough; the whites among the crew, almost without exception, behaved admirably, most of the negroes also. The fat yellow pastry-cook soothed a family of screaming children and their mother. The texas-tender and the cub-pilot dug life-preservers out from under bunks. Furthermore they had the forethought to lift a dozen or more stateroom doors off their hinges,

these doors being especially contrived for such swift unshipping, and cast them over the guards on the chance someone might need an auxiliary life-raft. Other volunteers swung a yawl off the canted hurricane-deck and lowered it—a useless gesture as it turned out.

Of course there was a certain amount of aimless running to and fro, a chorus of alarmed shrieking, a muddle here and there of vain confusions. Even so there was to be a remarkably light loss of life and an even shorter casualty list. Captain Lockwood broke an ankle when all his weight came upon it as he tumbled into an open hatchway; and the second mate was knocked senseless by a fall down the texas gangway after somebody caromed against him.

Later on, when they were quieter, divers of the travelers remembered how a half-dressed, rawboned, furious man had with frightful cursing and formidable fists checked a rush of temporarily frenzied deck-passengers across the forecastle and how, a minute or two after this when the burning packet swung in among the half-submerged willows off the bank and for a little space grounded herself there, this same person passed two shivering women and five squealing young ones over the bow to other rescuers standing shoulder-deep in water to receive these living burdens and wade ashore with them through the threshing hedge of slender tree trunks.

It was Cap'n Tip January who single-handed had stopped the crazed rush on the lower deck, who then had taken over the disabled skipper's duties, and who now, being himself on the point of quitting the wreck, all at once thrust out a detaining hand and clutched the last human save himself remaining aboard—a little de-

formed roustabout. He jerked the wriggling negro back.

"There wuz a sick nigger on a pallet back behind the engine-room," he cried out. "You come on with me and help tote him out—ef he's still there!"

The commandeered helper desired with all his soul to quit this foundering blazing craft. He feared a hideous death, but there was a thing he feared still more—this man-killer who had four imaginary but justified notches for lethal remembrance on his gun butt. So he compelled his palsied legs to follow his dreadful leader aft, they both clambering over the freight heaps. But the man they sought for was gone; either he had escaped unaided or had been borne to safety. So they came scrambling back to the fore-part.

Quick as they had been, the boat's hull had unbeached itself. Slipping off the salvation of the shelving bar which temporarily had detained her, the Emma Katie Lucas was far out again from the shoreline and blundering down-current, twisting and turning blindly. By now her boiler deck was a furnace, her texas an oblong torch, her pilot-house the squared peak of a spouting volcano. There was a vast glowing, a bloody smearing like an infernal false dawn, against the sky overhead. The rolling black smoke and the thousands of big live sparks and crackling firebrands which mounted upward were lost in that great glare and the rain, coming down through it, looked like drops of red molten iron. And these two were alone, bound for mid-stream.

"Nigger," said Cap'n January, "we've got to swim fur it ef we don't want to fry alive. Come on—she won't stay up much longer and it's deep out here." He

was in water over his shoetops now, the deck beneath him being awash; but the heat on his face was terrific.

"Oh, Gawd, boss, please, suh, save me!" screeched the darky. "Oh, Gawd, boss, I can't swim nary lick!"

"That so?" Cap'n Tip January's manner was almost casual, his voice calculating, his eye measuring the prospects for escape. "Well, I can't have you clawin' me round the neck and pullin' me under."

"Oh, Gawd Ermighty, boss, don't leave me here fur to perish! You made me stay behind wid you! Don't lemme perish, fur Gawd's sake!"

"Come here to me," bade Cap'n Tip.

Babbling, beseeching, groping, a figure of raving terror, the hunchback stumbled toward him; and when he was close enough the white man expertly struck him squarely on the jaw and felled him like a steer in a slaughter-pen. January stooped, hooked the fingers of his left hand in the back of his man's woolen neckband and slid off the gunwale, the inert form of his companion splashing in behind him.

The almost ice-cold stream closed over them. Immediately they were up, their heads making two black dots on the blood-colored expanse. But it was hard for Cap'n Tip to stay up, with that dead-weight encumbering him, and harder still to keep the stunned black man's face above the slapping little waves.

He was a strong sinewy man, though, and a strong swimmer. Half towing, half pushing his burden, he swam a quartering course. He aimed for an outjutting point some quarter-mile below where the rest of the survivors had refugeed. He almost made it, too; but he got into a tangle of undergrowth, and—what to him, numbed and almost exhausted as he was, became

an even more serious matter—he got into a riffle of corn-stalks and bark and lost cross-ties and fence-rails —flotsam which the river had brought down from above and had left here among the projecting brush in a woven-together network. It was like being in a trap. He couldn't touch bottom, either. He must swim out again and try for it somewhere farther down where the drift was not so thick. Unencumbered, he might make it.

Even in that dire extremity though, it did not occur to him that he should let go of his victim. Whatever Cap'n Tip January had started in his life he had finished—from swimming exploits to homicides.

He turned from the shore edge and struck out. The current pulled at his legs like an undertow. The strokes of his one free arm became slower, more feeble. An obstacle overtook him—a great sycamore tree, undermined and uptorn by the January freshets somewhere in the upper valley, riding high as it went past trunk first, its roots asprawl like the fingers of a drowning giant reaching for proverbial straws. He clutched for it but the slimy smooth bole offered him no hand grips. It slid away from him, and its limbs caught him and enmeshed him and pushed him under. There was a noise as of many waters in his ears, and when next he came up and brought the negro up with him he was past swimming, almost past any further effort. His despairing eyes were filmed and glazing from the strain of his futile struggling against such odds as these odds were.

His head sank and in his agony he gasped out words strange for him to be uttering:

"God save me! · Oh, God, give me a sign! Oh,

God, show me mercy now and I swear—to—you—God—I'll—" The river washed the words out of his mouth. His lips below the surface made bubbling sounds. The bobbing head sank until only the top of the scalp showed.

Something bumped him—something hard and sharp, like a corner of something, striking against his ear. He threw his right arm out and it fell across a flat smooth surface, a sustaining surface, for it bore his weight and amply supported him. He managed somehow to wriggle his trunk across it. And after a while it took him ashore, he steering with his tired legs and with leaden twists of his body.

Presently, when he could think and see and lift his head, he did lift it a matter of inches. The negro he had saved was beside him, half in and half out of water, face upward though and breathing. The hulk was abreast of him but far out from land. The radiance from it made rosy stripings and stipplings on the ripples about him. The light above was like the fiery light of the Judgment Morn, but the collapsing framework of the wreck, drifting with its bow to him, farther and farther away, was like a flaming, receding gateway to Perdition.

He raised himself higher, getting purchase with his hands and props for his weight with his arms. That which had brought him here to this haven was beneath him. It was a stateroom door. By the crimson illumination which covered him and all else, he saw under his breast the two lines that were painted with fresh bright paint across its uppermost panel. He read what the text said.

He read it and reread it. It said:

HE MAKETH ME TO LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES: HE LEADETH ME BESIDE THE STILL WATERS.

Like a man befuddled by some unbelievable revelation and seeking further confirmation of it, he stared about him. He was in a little cove, a sort of tiny basin behind the point of land, and here the water was almost entirely quiet save for a gentle lapping. On the bank, almost at the level of his questioning eyes, was a small natural pasture. Its herbage had come through the mild Southern winter verdant and fresh—not greatly scathed by the frosts or by the rare freezes, but healthy-looking and having the soft look of spring upon it.

Cap'n January reared himself on his knees and lifted his two dripping arms aloft.

It was after midnight when the tugboat John Ort Number Two, with rafted logs in tow, came along and took away the survivors. Barring nerves and the pains of exposure in their soaked garments, most of them seemed to have weathered the experience fairly well. Mr. Yarbro was still unconscious as they carried his two hundred and eighty pounds aboard. He remained so quite a while. It turned out he had a slight concussion of the brain. They had feared it might be a fractured skull.

When he came groping back to himself two days later, he was in a room at the old Richmond House with no idea how he had got there; and at the foot of the bed loomed his brother-mate, Old Hoss McHovey, quivering with the desire to tell him the news.

"How many lost?" asked Mr. Yarbro, as the mists

of confusion cleared out of his head. Which naturally would be the first question a real steamboatman would ask.

"Two rousters and one deck-passenger missin'—that's all. And nobody much bunged-up exceptin' you and Billy Lockwood. The big boss is in a swivit, though—jest sweatin' blood and salty tears."

"Whut fur?"

"He's sort of rebellious, ez you might say. He's lettin' on like he thinks Blessed Provi*dence* ain't acted right by him. I reckin he'll be more reconciled in due time but now he says look what the Lord up and done to him after all he'd done fur the Lord—first ordainin' fur her to run through herself in the very wust place and at the very wust time fur that to happen, then lettin' her saddles-bag herself on that there cussed bridge-post and bust wide-open same ez a rotten pumpkin, and then on top of the rest of it, sufferin' a pleg-takid keerless idiot of a painter to go and leave half a bucket of raw turpentine right in the identical spot where another pleg-takid idiot of a night watchman would see it and think 'twuz water and go and slap it onto a bed of livin' coals. Then when we git back here he finds out that last week whilst he wuz so busy gittin' religion he let part of the inshorance lapse on her and so he stands to lose a great big chunk of money—and you know yourself the boss likes a dollar ez much ez the next one. Oh, he's jolted—he shorely is jolted!"

"Well, I'll—" began the invalid, but Old Hoss's eager speech overrode his feebler voice.

"I ain't sayin' he's backslid, but ef he ever should there's somebody to take his place. Guess who? You'll never guess in a million years. Tip January—that's who!"

"Well, I'll be—"

"Yes, suh, Tip January has done went and reformed his ways. Brags he's goin' to turn preacher and ride the river savin' souls. Says he asked the Lord fur a sign when he was sinkin', and the Lord answered him out of the skies. Why, comin' down on the John Ort Number Two, he led a prayer-meetin' of thanksgivin' fur us all bein' delivered out of the jaws of death—that's how he puts it. Prayed right well, too, fur whut you might call a rank green amachure."

"Well, I'll be yal—"

"He's got one follower already—a sawed-off little humpback nigger that he drug ashore with him. He told that there nigger he'd saved his life fur him and now he was goin' to save his soul fur him. So the nigger's goin' trail with him. He'd better!"

And now the historic sentence was to be finished.

"Well, I'll be yaller-damned!" said Yaller Dam.

CHAPTER V—*But No Dam Yankee*

EVERYBODY on the river knew Major Marmaduke Todd. He was forever traipsing back and forth on the river. He was a commissioner for the National Military Park up at Shiloh. Our government has a different arrangement now, probably a more businesslike if a less sentimental arrangement; but once upon a time it was provided by act of congress that there must be three commissioners and that all three must be men who had seen active service on the battlefield of Shiloh, two of them to be Unionists and the remaining one an ex-Confederate.

Major Todd was the chairman of this commission. A former colonel of volunteers and a former brevet brigadier were his associates. The colonel was a small, high-tempered, terrifically patriotic old gentleman, who had been a congressman until a shift in politics divorced him from the payroll and turned him into what Washington called a lame duck, and paved the way for his descent into this present easy berth.

On the other hand the ex-brigadier was an extraordinarily plump old gentleman, serious with that intense seriousness which seems so very remarkable when you find it in a fat man and, to the eye, an easy-going old gentleman. But that was wherein your eye would be fooling you, because he really was very set in his ways. He took his membership and his duties with an im-

pregnable solemnity and maintained a sort of polite but exceedingly poisonous feud with the colonel.

But the major was not little and peppery, neither was he large and ponderous. He was tall, raw-boned, walked with a curious gait, and he could take a joke or a drink—and he would. An important part of his task as he conceived it was to play the part of peacemaker between his confrères. It is written that blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the favors of Heaven. There were times when the major must have earned his inheritance thrice over.

They knew him—and it might be added, liked him—on the packets he rode, the Lady Slidell, the General Joe Wheeler, the Fleetwing, the Linda Smythe and the rest of them. He traveled to and fro so often that the crews came to regard him almost as one of themselves and, as he often said, he felt more at home on a steamboat than he did on dry ground. It was one trip on the Linda Smythe, of the Withers Line, that he had his famous little set-to with the lady passenger from down in Mississippi—an episode which the old-timers like to recall even to this good day.

The lady from down in Mississippi was from very far down in Mississippi, where the opinions, like the levees, nearly all ran the same way. She was an elderly lady, and her own opinions had solidified with her age until she was practically, as you might say, adamant. Mr. Dorsey Dozier, the chief clerk, introduced Major Todd to her; and he sat down by her on the boiler deck, and they talked together of this and that. Before the conversation had gone far, it was inevitable that the subject of The War should come up.

North of here people spoke of the war between the

states—if, indeed, they spoke of it at all—as an event of a past century, which it was, the Christian world having already turned the corner into its nineteen-hundred-and-somethinged year. But down here when they spoke of it, which someone invariably did, it was as though it had ended only last week or last month.

It was at this point that the lady from Mississippi fell into an error—one, though, for which she scarcely could be blamed. In the first place, the major used an accent akin to hers—perhaps a trifle more strident but nevertheless closely enough related for all purposes. Then, too, he had stated that he was a good Democrat, although he needn't have included the qualifying adjective because to her all Democrats were good. So when Shiloh was referred to and he happened to mention that he had been wounded there—in the left shoulder and again in the leg—the lady, being by this time thoroughly deceived, naturally jumped at conclusions and, as one devoted partisan to another, spoke feelingly of a common love for the Precious Cause which had become a Precious Memory.

The major looked at her and smiled. He said: "Madam, I'm afraid that unintentionally I've been sailing before you under false colors. When I told you just now that I fought at Shiloh I forgot to tell you which side I fought on."

"Oh!" she said. She plainly was shocked. "Oh, I certainly do beg your pardon," she went on, her tone growing chillier by the syllable, "but your manner, your bearing—so like that of a true Southern gentleman! Why, I should never, never have suspected that you were, that you could be a—a—"

From motives of a ladylike delicacy she did not fin-

ish the sentence. There was no need that she should finish it. All persons residing below Mason and Dixon's Line knew there was one swear word which when employed in a given connection was no swear word, not even though it fell from the unsullied lips of a gentlewoman of what might be called the mid-Jeffersondavisorian Era.

"Madam," said Major Todd, and he arose and bowed low before her, "permit me to make myself clear. For at least three generations my people on both sides have been Southern people. I myself am Southern born. I have always lived in the South. I expect to die here. I was one of three brothers, I being the youngest. The other two were Confederate soldiers. My father was a strong Confederate sympathizer. I claim to be an orthodox Southerner in my habits and tastes.

"I think anybody who prefers pumpkin pie to sweet-potato pie suffers from a derangement of the intellect. I never take maple syrup if I can get New Orleans molasses. I maintain that a cook who deliberately puts sugar in corn bread is a menace to our national civilization. A man who would crush the mint in his toddy would put scorpions in a baby's bed. I never had any use for carpetbaggers or scalawags or Black Radicals or turncoats or renegades or professional wavers of the Bloody Shirt. I was against Reconstruction. In this happier day and time I am against sectional intolerance no matter where it originates.

"In the light of my present judgments I think Robert E. Lee was one of the noblest souls America has ever produced. I also think the same thing about Ulysses S. Grant. As for Abraham Lincoln, I think he stands alone. Because, you see, madam, back in 1861 there

happened to be a slight difference of opinion in our family touching on secession and it also happened that I formed a strongly prejudiced minority of one. In accordance with the dictates of my conscience, which has never reproached me since on this score, I enlisted in a Northern regiment and served four years in it.

"I am not ashamed of that fact." He fingered gently the little button of the Loyal Legion in his buttonhole. "I am exceedingly proud of it. This is not an apology, madam, it is an explanation. Madam, I am a Union veteran in good standing. But, madam, I am no dam Yankee!"

Afterwards, recounting the incident, the major said he was afraid the laugh had been on him. Some people thought the laugh had been on the lady from down in Mississippi.

Be that as it may, such was the major's declaration of independence, his platform of principles, his motto. He was a Southerner—and don't you forget it! He had been a volunteer in the Federal army, going in as a private, coming out as a scarred-up battalion commander. He never let you forget that, either. But no dam Yankee!

Now, it was decreed by the little deputy fates who post up the ledgers for us lesser earthlings that there should be an affair of the heart between the children of Major Todd's fellow commissioners, or to be specific about it, between the general's youngest daughter and the colonel's only son by his second marriage. It furthermore was decreed that in this matter the main item of bookkeeping should be complicated with cross-entries and with debits greatly in excess of the credits. There was a good deal of red-inking to the whole transac-

tion; any expert accountant will tell you what that means.

And finally, it was so ordered that the major should be projected headlong into the tangled equation. In fact, before the record was closed on this particular case, one whole page of destiny's docket practically belonged to him and his gimpy legs and his romantic if sixty-odd-year-old soul.

It was one of those affairs of the heart which bloom suddenly and passionately and, according to most mortal standards, beautifully. It wove itself like a slender thread of a rainbow through a faded, ravelly blue-and-gray warp. It was, so to speak, the spirit of youth rampant on a field of crotchety age and decrepitude. And—if you want to be especially flowery about it—it sprang up among the white tombstones and the battered black tree trunks of a battle-ground as though—we're still being flowery, you understand—as though a wild rose grew in the mouth of a rusted cannon. Also, and in yet another essential regard, it was as to season conventionally ordained, since it came to pass in the springtime when a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love and all that sort of thing.

A good journeyman poet could make something out of this.

Any day and for a valid reason or for none at all, one or more of the commissioners might visit Shiloh, but all three of them made a point of being present for a whole week in the latter part of each April. It was the week during which fell the anniversaries of those two great days of fighting there; and in it the three transacted such accumulated business as properly was brought before them, and they bestowed their official

greetings upon the veterans of both armies, who came by the thousands—for in those days there were thousands of veterans to come—and they received various delegations and sat in judgment on divers petitions.

Between times there were small separate reunions craving the lights of their countenances, and often monuments to be unveiled and markers to be dedicated; but always speeches to be made or else speeches to be listened to; and so on and so forth.

The whole valley reacted to the merits of the occasion. The valley itself would be decked out in its richest, tenderest greens, would be pink and white with its spring blossoms, like a bride; and up the river which drained it would come steamers brightened with all the flags and all the buntings they could muster, with brass bands aboard and many old soldiers, Blue or Gray or mixed, as the case might be. All the steamboat owners ran special excursions that week. From the four states which bordered on the river and particularly from the country roundabout Shiloh more old soldiers would flock in, but these mostly had worn the Gray.

Then ensued a great shaking of hands across the once gory Chasm, a great and hearty slapping of friendly palms on receptive backs, a great professing of eternal amity and everlasting concord—with certain mental reservations on either side. Down under the surface courtesy, under the intermingled currents of hospitality graciously extended and hospitality graciously accepted, you might have detected now and again the lingering sparks of an olden and a deadly flame. You could forgive, but you didn't have to forget, did you?

"Pardner," U.C.V. would say to G.A.R. his gray-sleeved arm about a pair of dark-blue shoulders, "pard-

ner, it seems like to me that right about here is the place where you fellers broke and started in runnin' fur the gunboats."

"Well, now, cumrud," G.A.R. would answer, his tone being sugared with cordiality—oh, very heavily sugared but nevertheless firm—"I'd say this here is probably somewheres in the neighborhood of where we—hem—began falling back to reform our lines—purposes of strategy, y' understand."

"You shorely proved you had the ambition fur it—fallin' back, mean to say. I was pretty toler'ble spry on my pins my ownself those times and I seem to recollect you fell back so fast I couldn't ketch up with ary one of you boys."

"Speaking of skedaddling, cumrud, you folks showed us some mighty lively heels that next day going off towards Corinth."

"Oh, well, whut with you gettin' all them reinforcements and us bein' outnumbered and tired out besides frum lickin' you fellers—"

"We wasn't talking about numbers; we was talking about runnin'."

"Was we? Well, maybe we was . . . I see some boys over yonder I know. I'm mighty glad I met up with you. See you ag'in!"

"Same to you. We'll visit with one another some other time. Good day to you, cumrud."

"So long, pardner."

"Was knockin' round and run acrost a stubborn old Blue Belly from Iowy," U.C.V. would be saying a little later to sundry of his own kind. "Oh, I reckin he meant well enough; just didn't know no better, that's all. Him claimin' that there panic we throwed 'em into

that first day when they stampeded into the river was an orderly retreat. Him spoutin' about 'purposes of strategy'! Purposes of strategy—hell!"

"Those Iowa scoundrels always were stubborn," somebody else would say. "Remember, don't you, Joe, that hand-to-hand tussle one of their regiments gave our battery at Chickamauga? One Iowa farm-hand was so stubborn he tried to stick a bayonet all the way through me. Came mighty near succeedin', too."

"Got to talking with a contrary Johnny bit ago," G.A.R. about this time would be stating for the benefit of a congenial group. "I declare I was put out for a minute—the way he bragged. Why, cumruds, you'd 'a' thought, listening to him, that all the history books was wrong and the dad-fetchit Rebs won this here battle!"

"Oh, let 'em brag. These United States is still these United States, ain't they? And one of 'em mixed me up a mighty tasty swig of licker just awhile ago. About one more dram like that one was and I'd be ready to kiss Jeff Davis."

That, more or less, was as it would go on, and this time while it went on, a good-looking, upstanding young gentleman from the North, to wit, one Mr. Ethan Allen Van Duzen, attorney at law of Battle Creek, Michigan, and an exceedingly pretty young lady from the South who, to-witting some more, was no less a personage than little Miss Sally Ann MacAllister, reigning belle of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, were pledging their faith forever and ever, world without end, till death did them part, beneath a green canopy where a pair of mating thrushes discussed housekeeping arrangements on a limb which Minié balls may have

pierced. And close beside them, winding off through the fragrant grove, ran a sunken road that once, on just such another soft April afternoon as this, had been brimful of dead men, dying men, stricken men, but now instead was hidden under soft brown leaf mold and wild violets.

But with the sweet, unreasoning, entirely reasonable selfishness of youth, these twain conceited that the violets were out on their account, that the amorous gentleman thrush sang his song to them and not to his own speckle-breasted lady-love, that this trysting-place, with its whispering memories of slaughter and pain of heroisms and agonies, had been especially contrived by Nature for their present and exclusive usage.

If only two stern parents were as friendly as the violets or even one-tenth as amiably inclined as the brown thrushes, this chapter had never been written. Or if there were no such thing in the world as love at first sight, there could have been no tale to write, either. But, somewhat to shorten a short story, love at first sight as a scientific and incontrovertible fact had been demonstrated on the first day of the current week. This then was the week's third day, and in the meanwhile much progress had been made.

Indeed, progress had been made to the point where the couple concerned occasionally could pause from plighting for long enough to wonder why the Providence which had been so kind as now to bring them together could have been so unkind as to keep them apart until now.

Behold how simply Providence had operated to produce this so altogether lovely an outcome: Colonel Van Duzen's son had other plans for the month of April,

but at the eleventh hour those plans failed, and he decided—it seemed to him a whim then, but today he recognized it as a happy hinge for the turning of one of creation's most perfect schemes—he decided to come along with his father and look upon the scenes of his father's honorable and gallant achievements in the realm of military distinction. Simultaneously and at a point far distant, General MacAllister's daughter, having it in mind to visit a former schoolmate at Knoxville, found she could spare a week on the way for viewing a spot where not one alone but several of her breed had most valorously acquitted themselves.

Both of them at the outset had looked forward to rather boring experiences; either of them, looking back on it, could take credit for having been inspired by a desire to please an older person. Wherefore and lo, the bread cast upon the waters of affection was returning—not after many days, but after a miraculous few —as wedding cake. Or was it?

Because a brace of lions stood in the path aroaring. At least, one of the lions roared. The testy growlings of the second might sound less ominous but were just as hostile to their future rose-colored intents.

The lion which roared was old General MacAllister; the lion which growled was old Colonel Van Duzen. After years of consistent disagreement these eminent gentlemen at last had found an issue upon which they might stand together firmly united. Neither desired that his child should be in love with the other's child; or if love already had come, that the affair should go further. They equally were ready to transmit to the generation oncoming the quarrel of the generation outgoing.

For to General MacAllister this saucy Sally Ann of his was as the apple of his eye. She had been born to him in his middle life; she had been the baby of his household; by his jealous reckonings she still was a baby. He wanted her to have beaux a-plenty, else he had not been a true Southerner. He wanted her within bounds to flirt with them; it was a part of her heritage to flirt. Of course he did not want her to die an old maid. But when the day came for her to marry—a day hopefully regarded by him as being still far distant—he wanted, father-like, to have a hand in picking and choosing the bridegroom.

Above all things else, though, he wanted no serious entanglements with the house of his ancient foeman. Knowing nothing otherwise to the detriment of the youth, he found it amply sufficient that the youth should be the offspring of a Van Duzen. Like father, like son; he would have it so.

As for the colonel, he had as much pride—family pride, personal pride, sectional pride—as the next one. He defied any living man to outdo him at nursing a grudge. Publicly he might advocate the burying of hatchets, but inwardly he entertained always the pleasing picture of burying his own private hatchet at the fat-enfolded base of a certain elderly skull. With genuine concern he had observed the ripening intimacy between his dear lad and his enemy's daughter, an intimacy dating, or so it appeared, from the moment when the pair met. With each passing hour spent by them in company his concern had increased, as well it might.

It might be a very foolish form of obstinacy; we'll concede that it was altogether foolish. But neverthe-

less it was a condition and not a theory. It was the Montagues against the Capulets all over again; it was Lancaster versus York. It was—to bring the metaphor a few centuries nearer—the Hatfields and the McCoys.

So, along with the joy there was trouble for those two who traded passionate vows in their greenwood by the sunken road behind old Shiloh church.

CHAPTER VI—*The Second Battle of Shiloh*

MAJOR TODD emerged from Friday's session of the commission and was in a mood of high good humor. Among other matters which had come up there were one or two about which he had his own way.

Drawings had been submitted for a shaft in memory of an Alabama command. The colonel felt moved to take exceptions to the same. The design called for a carving of the Stars and Bars. The colonel seemed to scent smoldering treason in this proposed exploitation of that conquered banner. The colonel seemed to scent smoldering treason in so many places. Before the general, who at once boiled up, could boil over, Major Todd was on his feet. He said:

"The regulations provide that anything—any weapon, any article of uniform, any article of warfare—which was used or displayed in action here may be represented in the form of tablets or monuments or markers. Now, it is my distinct recollection that I saw that flag on this field. In fact, during the first day's engagement I had to move toward the rear with considerable alacrity to keep from being overtaken by the earnest gentlemen who were escorting it at the time. I saw it and I'm not likely to forget having seen it, either. I shall vote for the approval of this plan."

He did so, the general heartily and indignantly concurring. So that was that. Then a little later the park superintendent begged leave to report that a hitherto

overlooked grave had been found in a quite isolated and remote thicket of the government reservation. It had not been possible to identify the long-buried occupant of that lonely grave by name, but from maps and records he was pretty sure he had established data as to the regiment in which the deceased had served and, by inference, the state from which he hailed.

"I took Major Todd here out there this morning and showed him the place," the superintendent continued. "I suggested that the precedent of disinterring scattered bodies and reburying them in the enclosure devoted to unknown Southern dead be followed in this case."

"I'm against that idea," spoke up the major promptly. "In most cases I'd say yes, but in this case, no."

"Might I inquire why, suh?" quoth the general, bridling anew. His pliant hackles rose and bristled.

"You might," answered the major calmly; "and I'll tell you: That dead man is sleeping where he fell—no soldier could ask for a more fitting resting-place. But that's not my real reason for wishing to leave what's left of him undisturbed. My real reason is this: So far as the evidence goes to show, that man was from Kentucky. And, gentlemen, he's buried under the prettiest mint bed you ever did see! A Kentuckian who couldn't be satisfied to await eternity under a mint patch couldn't be happy anywhere else—not even if you put a marble shaft a mile high over him and planted ten solid acres of weeping willows. Gentlemen, I insist that that Kentuckian be left where any true Kentuckian ought to be proud and happy to stay."

The argument prevailed. Why wouldn't it—in the julep season? Accordingly, and as stated, the major felt quite well pleased with himself and everything, as

he issued forth into the rosy afterglow of the peaceful evening.

It wouldn't be supper time for an hour or so yet. He figured a short walk might stimulate an already healthy appetite. Tacking away from the main driveway leading inland across the parked battle-ground, he chose to stroll along one of the by-paths. He was tired of crowds; tired of being introduced or of introducing himself to this one or that one among the assembled comrades. He hoped nobody would recognize him.

The trouble, though, with the major was that nobody who had ever seen him walking would fail to recognize him again provided he were afoot. To begin with, nature noticeably had made him bow-legged. Then one of those Confederate bullets which winged him in '62 in this very woodland had accentuated the outward skew of his left leg. He traveled with a sort of scallopy rolling motion. When he went slowly he made you think of gimlets, but when he was in a hurry to get somewhere he made you think of corkscrews. Considered as a pedestrian, he was probably one of the most conspicuous pedestrians that you'd find in any climate.

That twistiwise gait of his was a welcome sight for a pair of young persons who hastened across a broad strip of greensward to intercept him in a sort of natural ambuscade where the shrubbery which flanked the path, both sides, offered shields from casual observation.

"Oh, major," cried little Miss Sally Ann, running up to him, "we've been waiting here ever so long to waylay you! We're just dying to see you."

Once a Kentuckian always a Kentuckian. The major swept off his large white hat with a gesture which absolutely would have turned any Elizabethan cavalier—say,

Sir Walter Raleigh, for choice—as green as a string-bean.

"My dear child," he stated in his courtliest manner, which was a very courtly manner indeed, "I am honored beyond my deserts. I am yours to command."

"Remember, that's a promise," Miss Sally Ann took him up so promptly that he gave a slight start.

"As a matter of fact, Major Todd, we will be very grateful to you for your help," said young Mr. Van Duzen. "There's an emergency, and we can't think of anyone else to turn to."

"Hum," said the veteran. It was beginning to dawn upon him that possibly he had been just a trifle rash with his pledge of service. There was something so conspirator-like about this pair, she all tremulous and flushed, he obviously nervous. "Hum," the major said again, prolonging it with extra *m's*. "Before I trap myself any further, would you mind please telling me just what this emergency is?"

"It's this," explained the young man. "Miss MacAllister and I are engaged. But nobody who counts really knows it yet but you."

"May I then be the first to congrat—"

"Please, sir! We are engaged and we intend to be married."

"Very laudable, I'm sure, but—"

"But my father would be against it and it seems like Allen's father would be against it just simply because my father would be against it! And so we've decided to run away." This was Sally Ann speaking flurriedly, breathlessly.

"Or in other words, to elope," added the fiancé, as though to make the meaning doubly clear.

"And that's where you come in, major dear," supplemented the affianced.

"One moment, now." The major lifted an authoritative palm. He was being very judicial; at least he fancied he was. "Permit me to ask a question or two: When did you two meet for the first time?"

"Last Monday afternoon at a quarter past three."

Since the young man had answered and with such chronological exactitude, the major addressed his second query to him: "And when did you first discover that you had become seriously attracted to this young lady?"

"I just told you, sir. Monday afternoon, quarter past three."

"Ah, indeed!" The interrogator looked now at her. "And you?"

"About the same time. It seemed to come over me, just like that! All at once!"

"Ah hah! And when did the engagement follow?"

"Oh, not till Wednesday. You see, major, we both felt that we ought to wait until we were perfectly sure."

"And when did you reach the decision that you would elope?"

"Oh, that wasn't until this morning. We discussed everything very thoroughly first."

"But why elope at all?"

"Oh, major!" exclaimed Sally Ann. "You don't know my father!"

"Oh, don't I? My dear, your father and I have been confrères for upwards of six years."

"Then you *do* know how set and determined and aggravating he can be when he takes a notion about something. He's a perfect old darling, my father is, and I adore him. But, oh, he can be so hard-headed!"

"I will concede that your esteemed father is a man of quite positive views on various subjects. I've remarked this quality of his to myself upon a number of occasions. But am I to assume that merely on the supposition that your respective parents—either or both—might enter an objection to this union you are preparing—"

"Not at all, sir. I'm afraid we've sort of rushed you off your feet. Perhaps I'd better try to explain in detail the whole situation?"

"Yes, do," assented Sally Ann. She lifted a confident face from her lover's worried one to the major's wrinkly one. "Allen can explain things just beautifully, major. He'll tell you everything and then you'll realize for yourself that we're exactly right."

For what followed the major made an excellent, a most sympathetic audience. When Allen said he didn't see how anybody who was in his right senses could keep from falling in love with Sally Ann the major promptly seconded the motion and declared that if only he were forty years younger he himself would be offering strong competition in that selfsame quarter. When Sally Ann interrupted to declare that no one alive could truthfully say anything against Allen's character or his future prospects the major admitted, slipping the words in, as it were, sidewise, that such was exactly the estimate he had formed from the hour of becoming acquainted with Allen.

When he was told how Allen had gone straight to his father the night before and had informed that choleric person how matters stood, Sally Ann having already approached her father indirectly and, so to speak, by a roundabout route; and how immediately intense opposi-

tion had developed from these parental sources, the major remarked:

"Now I begin to see why both of them were so exceedingly polite to each other today—and so exceedingly embittered toward me. They had to take it out on somebody."

And when Allen burst out with: "Don't you agree with me, sir, that it's a hideous shame merely because General MacAllister dislikes my father and the things my father stands for, and merely because my father has this silent quarrel with General MacAllister and is so touchy and stand-offish and disapproves of nearly everything Southern, that we—Sally Ann and I—should have to plot behind their backs for our chance for a hope of happiness?" the major, answering in his own way, said:

"Do you know, young people, I've about decided that the great mistake I made was not fighting against both sides just in order to lick a little common sense into the heads of certain colonels and generals."

All at once he, who had meant to maintain an aloof impartial attitude, found himself with one impulsive hand patting Sally Ann on her shoulder and with the other giving Allen's nearer shoulder slaps of hearty endorsement. For his age, it is probable that Major Todd had one of the most romantic natures in the habitable globe. It likewise is probable, or at any rate possible, that at this moment the major had thought of his own youthful love-making. There was an old story of an old time to the effect that he stole his own bride out from under a vengeful father's nose with the aid of a ladder raised to a bedroom window and a fast trotter hitched to a side-bar buggy.

All at once he found himself committed as a partizan and an accessory to the impending venture. It was none of his business, but quite evidently it was going to be his business.

All at once he found himself saying: "You'll need a license to get married in this state?"

"That's been attended to, sir."

"And a preacher, of course?"

"We thought about that, too, suh, or Allen did—he thinks of everything!"

"Well, then, where do I figure except as a friend and well-wisher? Mind you, though," he added with a sudden rush of caution, "I'm not saying that I propose to get myself involved in this escapade of yours at all. I'm merely asking."

"Oh, major dear, you'll never regret it!" pleaded Sally Ann, clinging to his arm and turning the devastating batteries of a pair of big swimming violet-blue eyes upon him. "As things stand, father would never give his consent beforehand. He'd keep us apart forever if he could. He'd say it was only a passing fancy and that I'd get over it. He's already as good as said that—the idea! But after it's done he'll come round. He'll see what I see in Allen. He'll admire him as much as I love him. And I'll make Allen's father like me—I'll just make him! He's never had a daughter of his own. I'll flirt outrageously with him, I'll make over him. Oh, you'll see."

"I don't doubt it in the least," granted the major. "You have quite a way with you, young woman, and I should judge also you've had considerable practice at making persons of the opposite sex like you. But that's not telling me what I'm expected to do, if anything."

"I'll tell you, sir," said young Van Duzen. "I'll make it brief because there isn't any too much time to spare. I didn't dare go away myself to get the license. My father was suspicious of something being afoot—I could tell that; and the general has been watching Sally Ann like a hawk—or trying to. So I found a trustworthy man—perhaps you know him?—Ringgold is his name; he lives down here at the landing."

"I know him," said the major, who knew nearly everybody at nearly every landing. "Ben Ringgold. I reckon he's trustworthy enough although not what I'd call intellectually gifted."

"So early this morning I sent him down the river in a skiff. His job was to hustle on down to Savannah—that's the nearest county-seat I believe"—the major nodded in affirmation—"and get a license for us and then leave the skiff behind and catch the packet Linda Smythe, which was due to pass up by there late this afternoon. She did pass less than an hour ago—I found that out down at the river where they seemed to have word of her. So she ought to get here in less than an hour from now unless she's delayed at some landing in between, which they say isn't very probable; it's only eight or nine miles, you know.

"Ringgold will be on board with the license, but his orders are to stay there. As soon as the boat touches here—it'll be good and dark by then—Sally Ann and I are going to slip aboard and hide ourselves away until after she pulls out. Then it will be too late for anybody to stop us. Ringgold is to go on with us to a little place called Turner's about eight or nine miles further up-stream. There's a country preacher living there. I sent him word by Ringgold's son, who crossed

on the ferry and rode up horseback, to be waiting for our arrival. He'll marry us, and Ringgold will find us a place to stay tonight—he says he can do that—and in the morning we'll come back to ask forgiveness."

"That all sounds very well," said the major, "but still I don't see where I—"

"Pardon me. I'm just coming to that, sir. Your part—if you'll be so good—is to sort of stand guard behind us. On account of General MacAllister, I mean. If the worst comes to the worst, I'd defy my father—although of course I hate a scene—but with Sally Ann it's different. She's a minor. We—we had to get Ringgold to do a little fibbing about her age. So it might be fatal—it would be fatal—if the general should get wind of this and stop Sally Ann.

"All we want you to do is to be on watch when the Linda Smythe pulls in—that's the critical moment, as you can see for yourself—and if you see the general going toward the landing, please intercept him, delay him on some pretext or other—he'll not suspect you, however much he may be suspecting me—and hold him fast until the boat is gone with us safely on her."

"Oh, you will, major dear, won't you—for our sakes?" begged Sally Ann, again exercising those destructive eyes of hers.

"Children," said Major Todd, with the air of one sealing a momentous vow, "I'm just enough of a sentimental old fool to do that very little thing. And probably get shot for it afterwards. Anyhow," he added, offering a salve to his uneasy conscience, "I seem to recall an important matter which ought to be brought to General MacAllister's attention at the earliest opportunity."

CHAPTER VII—*Cupid and Hymen and Old Major Todd*

FONDLY flattering himself with the delusion that he was innocent of all semblance to a double-doer, but in reality looking as guilty as a man who has just set fire to an orphan asylum, Major Marmaduke Todd faithfully did his turn at sentry-go while the early twilight thickened about him. He had returned to the executive building adjoining the national cemetery, but his associates were gone—Colonel Van Duzen to the superintendent's house at the farther edge of the battle-field where the commissioners lodged, General MacAllister nobody knew exactly where. So on the bluff above the river, where he could command a view of all who passed, going or coming, the major vigilantly patroled to and fro on his callipered legs.

He presently heard, not a hundred yards from him but beyond his sight, below the bluff, a steamer blow for the landing, and gave a little jump; but before the blast died away, the major—who was enough of a river-man to be able to recognize boats by their whistles—knew it couldn't be the Linda Smythe. It must be then the Oscar J. Hooks also upbound. It was; that steamy cracked whine of hers was unmistakable. He remembered that she had been due hours before, but steamboat schedules were flexible tables always. She must be in a hurry to make up for lost time because almost immediately she was pulling out, as he could tell. She merely

had poked her nose to bank and then had withdrawn it.

Five minutes passed, then ten, fifteen, and to the major's strained ears came from downstream a familiar and, for this occasion, a welcome sound. Thus closely on the heels of her rival, the Linda Smythe was making port, too. Doubtless her call also would be a brief one; soon now with the elopers all would be well.

An overwhelming desire to be convinced that all was well with them lured the major away from his post. Stealthily, and casting furtive looks behind him, he retired up over and thence down below the brow of the land. Almost directly beneath him where her lights made ruddiness in the dusk, the Linda Smythe discharged cargo. Next she would receive freight, if any, for up-river points and expeditiously then would clear. Surely, he prayed, she would not tarry for long; she rarely did, though, here at Shiloh.

Peering thither, the major beheld on the flare-lit bank fronting the packet's bow, a figure—a figure whose pose, whose twisting neck and turning body bespoke irresolution, bafflement, confusion. He curlicued down the slant. He clutched that shape by its shoulder. He addressed it sharply. His voice was tense with a vague alarm, a rising concern.

"Ringgold, what are you doing here? Where are those two young people?"

Mr. Ringgold, matrimonial plenipotentiary extraordinary, laughed a hollow mirthless laugh. "That's whut I been astin' myself," said Mr. Ringgold. "Seems like there's been a hitch. But, by heck, 'tain't my fault! I brung the docymint fur 'em—you know about that, mebbe?" He winked meaningly. "And seems like they been hidin' behind that pile of gov'mint supplies

jest yonder and when the Hooks pulled in, they bein' ign'unt about sich things and not knowin' one boat frum 'nother, they jest bulged right erboard, not astin' no questions frum nobody—anyhow, that's whut I've jest found out frum a feller that seen 'em. And seems like they've gone skihootin' on up the river thinkin' all the time they wuz on the Lindy Smythe and expectin' to find me on her. And seems like there they go off yonder-ways"—he pointed to a blurry clump of lights just rounding the first bend above—"and seems like here I am and whut to do about it I don't know!"

"Good Lord!" groaned Major Todd. To himself he was thinking: "I've got to follow them—there's nobody else I can trust. No minister would dare go ahead without that license. They'll be left stranded all night at Turner's with nowhere for them to stay; probably nobody would take them in. It'll be ruination." Aloud to Ringgold he was snapping an order: "Give me the paper. You dust on home and keep your mouth shut!"

He crumpled the precious license into his pocket. He clambered up the stage plank between two rousters. He ascended the forecastle gangway. He bided impatiently on the boiler-deck guards forward. In five minutes—he thanked heaven it was only five minutes—the Linda Smythe withdrew to mid-channel and straightened away. In five minutes more her skipper appeared from below. He opened his mouth for a greeting, but the major had him by both lapels of his coat and was speaking:

"Captain Jim, there are certain reasons—highly important reasons—why'd I'd like for you to overhaul the Hooks—beat her into Turner's, if possible. Great favor to me! Anyhow, shove up alongside her as close

as you can—I've got a pressing private message for somebody aboard her. Understand?"

"Already fixin' to do one of those very things. And as for shovin' in close to her, that'll be easy; glad to accommodate you there, major; no trouble at all. But say, major, what's come over everybody tonight? First one gentleman busts up to me all in a swivet and asks me for personal reasons to ketch up with the Hooks before we reach Turner's and when I tell him I've got the fastest boat of the two all right, but she's got the start on me, and besides I've got a couple of stops to make in between, he ups and offers me fifty dollars cash to beat her in. Naturally I takes him up on his bid, and now not two minutes later here you come askin' for practically the same—"

"Who—who was the other man?" asked Major Todd. But he knew the answer. His sinking heart told him.

"Why, General MacAllister. Ain't you two bound on the same mission? He must 'a' followed you aboard not more'n a minute or two behind you. He's right down below here. I can—"

"No, no, don't call him. Don't—er—don't even tell him I'm on board. Oh, Lord!"

Sorrow-shaken, feeling almost as though he had suffered a deep bereavement, the major retreated down the guards, leaving a bewildered skipper to stare at his vanishing back.

Love's young dream—all split wide open, all ripped to thunderation! The downcast veteran went aimlessly by a row of closed stateroom doors. He really wasn't going anywhere; just disconsolately drifting. He brought up beyond the invisible dividing-line marking

a lesser partitioned-off space at the rear of the main cabin—the "bureau," this smaller compartment was called in river parlance. He halted here; you couldn't go much farther aft anyhow. He faced outward, with lack-luster eyes regarding the peaceful, darkened landscape past which they slid. Beneath his feet he could feel the Linda Smythe picking up speed. So soon she was under forced draft. There arose a steamy roaring, a quickening clank of machinery parts.

Directly behind him a door banged. A form, an impressively portly and dignified form—it revealed dignity even in that poor light—bulked against the rail, almost touching him. Idly, for lack of something better to do, he peered at it; made out its contours, its distinguishing items of costuming. And then, right there, right then, Major Todd really began to show four great gifts —a gift for intrigue, for diplomacy, for strategy, for action.

There had been steamboat races before then on the Tennessee River. There still will be races on the Tennessee River when we are all dead and gone—races for spite, races for money, races for reasons of business, races for reasons of sport. There have been races between bigger steamers on bigger streams—the Robert E. Lee versus the Natchez, for one famous example. There have been races for poets to make verses about—"a nigger squat on the safety valve and her furnace crammed, rozin and pine!"

Now here was a race that was different, though just how different it was, most of those persons who took the minor parts in it—crews and passengers as well—did not know while it lasted, and were not to know until after it was over.

Away they went, two medium-sized, prosaic-looking, commonplace stern-wheelers, and it was a foregone conclusion which one would win. But then the Oscar J. Hooks didn't even know she was being raced with—not yet she didn't. She stopped for a very brief call at Hamburg, swung back almost directly across stream to Churchwell's on the opposite bank, only a short mile above, came out from Churchwell's and squared her bows to the current, making good time but in no especial hurry about it.

So for a while, the rearmost boat, forging straight ahead, fairly ate up the intervening distance. It was beyond Churchwell's that the master of the Hooks, now leading by a half-mile margin, realized the Linda Smythe was following with intent to overhaul him. But why? Perhaps the Linda's captain had word of some fat unpledged consignment on beyond somewhere? Often in these matters it was first come, first served so far as the shipper on shore was concerned.

That must be it. What else could it be? Very well, then, the Hooks would give this opposition craft a tussle for it. The skipper called out orders. The wheel began to spin faster; big sparks flew out of the smokestacks; the boilers hummed. Behind her she kicked up a foaming hillocky wake.

But she had started her sprint too late. Anyway, the Linda Smythe was just naturally the faster boat of the two. Furlong by furlong, the Withers liner crawled up on the puffing independent packet. Her bow was even with the adversary's stern. She was hauling abreast; and now also, for reasons best known to herself, she was quartering, sheering over, swinging in closer and closer, almost dangerously close, so that either laboring

steamer wallowed and heaved in the swells thrown off by the other.

The churned-up water between narrowed to a matter of yards, then to a matter of feet—say, sixty feet. They were neck and neck now. Moved to marvel that the Linda Smythe should insist on becoming so near a neighbor, the Oscar J. Hooks' engineer, Mr. Jake Small, came forth from his greasy and clamorous domain and halted behind the barrier of the bull-rails just forward of it. From the lower deck of the Smythe at a point directly opposite came in a familiar voice a sharp hail.

"Hey, Jake!" cried the voice above the tumult.

"Why, major," he answered back, "hello! Whut's the big rush with you fellows anyway?"

"Jake, thank God it's you!" was the swift cryptic response. "Jake, two young people—boy and girl—went aboard you at Shiloh."

"Saw 'em myself. Acted like they was fleein' frum the wrath to come."

"They were!" The major's tone was grimly, snappily insistent. "Jake, I want that pair. Go for 'em, or send a darky for 'em, quick! Tell 'em I sent for 'em. Tell 'em I say to dust down there where you are now as fast as they can make it but keeping out of sight of everybody on this boat—if they can. When they get there you throw those bars down and let 'em out on your fantail as far back as they can go without actually walking overboard."

"But, major—"

"Don't ask any questions. Don't let them ask any questions. Do it!"

It was done before the minute hand on your grandfather's clock could make the circuit thrice. Two be-

mazed runaways, with arms interwoven and hands clutching, were balanced on a narrow cleated flangeway which extended past the stern proper to meet the turning thwartwise shaft of the wheel. Beneath them, just beneath them, the water was being beaten to a custard, to a creamy white batter, and great drops splashed in their bewildered faces.

"Turn this way, children, and stand side by side!" They caught the shouted command; they obeyed it. Across the intervening welter, the major's anxious face was visible where he leaned through an opening on the nearermost guards of the Linda's lower deck. He made a cup of his hands: "That's it! I've got the license here. I've got the preacher here! I've got the witnesses here!" He nodded his head sidewise and they could distinguish additional shapes in the shadows immediately behind their benefactor. "There's no time to explain anything, but there is time to get married—if we hurry. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" cried Sally Anne, "yes, major, darling!"

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes," cried Ethan Allen, "perfectly!"

"Splendid!" His voice was shrill with jubilance. And next a vast and sonorous voice, in volume twice as thick as his, in majesty at the least five times as majestic, in its throatiness indubitably a clerical voice, was boomingly uplifted to them:

"Will theah high cawntracting pahties kindly clasp each theah othah by theah right hand?" . . .

"I theahfoah pernounce you man and wife!"

Rarely have the holy rivets of wedlock been clinched on with a greater celerity than was the case here. But

then it isn't every wedding that can boast itself of so competent, so quick-witted a best man as Major Marmaduke Todd. . . .

Let us go back in the ritual to a point approximately fifteen seconds before the final binding words of the officiating dignitary had sounded on the night wind and while yet the bride's response was being murmured, the bridegroom having previously uttered his.

As nose by nose these paralleling steamboats raced, General MacAllister stood on the tip of the nose of his particular boat, or as near the tip of the nose as he could get; and he was puffed out with rage, but puffed out still more with a foretaste of his impending triumph over a rebellious daughter and her audacious accomplice. His exultant eye swept keenly the upper decks of the overtaken steamer. No sight of a pair of thwarted elopers there. He let his glance fall lower, go rearward and, for one instant, perhaps two, conceivably three, General MacAllister's two hundred and sixty five pounds froze solid with an intolerable horror, with an inconceivable remorse.

Where they were poised yonder on a perilous slender overhang within inches of the madly beating wheel, a murky light from the engine-room at their backs illuminated them. It revealed to him their resolute young figures, their rapt faces. Their hands were clasped, their lips moving as though in prayer. They raised their heads, they kissed each other lingeringly, fondly, as might two in token of an eternal farewell before a fatal plunge.

Colonel MacAllister thawed to life. He plunged off the forecastle, he lunged back headlong through a clut-

tered deck-space and as he lunged and as he plunged he gave voice tremendously:

"For God's sake, my child—my children, don't jump! Don't jump! I give in! I surrender! But don't jump! Have your own way! You were right! I was wrong! Only, don't jump!"

It was all over with by the time he came abreast of them, and the reverend aide, having pouched his fee, already was discreetly, not to say hastily, withdrawing; the witnesses, a fireman and a striker, also were retiring with speed. It was Major Todd therefore who took the impact of General MacAllister's last despairing lunge; it was Major Todd's stout grip which restrained him, and Major Todd's reassuring voice which by swift repetition dinned the soothing word into his distracted brain-cells:

"Ca'm yourself, general. This isn't a suicide. It's a wedding—that's all—a wedding!"

Those dreadful gongs which had been ringing in his quivering ears quit ringing. The general gasped and breathed again, and Reason reestablished herself upon her customary throne. He looked dumbly past the major. Over yonder, her face radiant, her eyes dewy, his Sally Ann was throwing him kisses, one kiss after another.

"Wedding?" he asked dazedly. "Wedding, you say? But how—when—where?"

"Just now; just finished."

"But—but who—"

"Oh! By a regular clergyman, quite orthodox, I gather. He happened to be a passenger traveling—hem—in the bureau."

"In the bureau!" A horrified stupefaction temporarily overcame the bride's father.

"I have his name. He gave me his card—oh, here it is." By the light of a deck lantern the major squinted at the pasteboard. "It appears," he stated, "that the ceremony was performed by the Right Reverend Virgil K. Bogardus, D.D., of Florence, Alabama, Bishop of the Zion A.M.E. Church, District of Northern Alabama and Northern Mississippi."

"Merciful heavens! A black—a nig—" The poor general choked on it.

"Well, reasonably dark-complected."

General MacAllister clutched for support at a handy stanchion but promptly rallied and a cold fury began to superimpose itself on the heat dying within him.

"While under a misapprehension as to the real circumstances here I offered my consent to this union. I stand by my word." He stated it handsomely. "But, Major Todd, when I think that had it not been for men of your kidney who fought to free that—that race—this thing, this unutterable thing could never have—"

"General Angus Donald MacAllister," interrupted Major Todd, "you listen to me: This is an hour for felicitations, not for recriminations. But before these boats reach bank and you step across with me from here to there to take your child in your arms and to welcome that splendid young gentleman who is now her husband and your son-in-law, I have just this to say to you, suh: You may have fought, among other reasons, to keep that race in servitude. Some may have fought to free it. But, suh, no trivial side-issues concerned me. I fought only to preserve the Union. General MacAllister, for the last time let me remind you that I am no dam Yankee!"

CHAPTER VIII—*The Prayin' Mate*

ON his knees each night at bedtime the Prayin' Mate would pray. He was praying to the Lord to send him a steamboat. It must be a steamboat suitable for the Tennessee River, a steamboat not too large and yet not too small, but answering generally to a certain given description; and the price on her would have to be right. That approximately was what he wanted, so naturally that was what Cap'n Tip January prayed for.

He craved to get back again on the river. He knew now that was where properly he belonged. His mission to the white savages had not proved a notable success. Perhaps he lacked that certain something—the personal magnetism or the rehearsed fervor or the stage presence, if you chose to put it that way—which for the experienced evangelist is his chief stock in trade. Certainly it was not to be denied that he lacked facility in the methods as in the professional argot of your tried and true exhorter.

His salvation was still such a young salvation, though. He had been cured of carnal sinning in early February, a reclamation dating back no further than the destruction of the Emma Katie Lucas. And here it was only the latter end of a prolonged summer. Yet seven months is seven months, and in those seven months he had by precept, by example, by public meetings and private pleadings, contended in a vineyard where the harvest seemed plentiful and the workers

were few, and even so could count no single recruit to godliness as a result of those ministrations.

In one thing at least he had shown wisdom: He had not set up his standard at a point remote and waited there for the local heathen to flock to him. He had hoist the standard among the very heathen. He was over across from port in the Duck's Nest with the shanty-boaters, as scornful townspeople called them—but their name for themselves was "house-boater."

He was living on a shanty-boat himself. In one end of that shanty-boat were his living quarters, his bachelor's hall. The rest of it, cut off by a cross-wall, was an improvised chapel. His negro man of all work slept on the deck or the roof of the squat cabin or even upon the bank under the willows. Mosquitoes had no terrors for so seasoned a river-rat as this black man was.

In the summer and the fall, the Duck's Nest harbored comparatively few craft. Winter-time was the big time there, when canny owners sent their shipping to rest in the lea of the spraddling island which stretched parallel with the town. Here where the warmer, bluer waters of the Tennessee poured forth and the long protective scimitar of Livingston Point curved out just above the meeting-place of two great rivers, was a famous cold-weather haven.

It was called an ice-harbor for the reason that it was free from ice. When the jams and the gorges broke in the Ohio above, the floes went grinding and sliding and growling down the other side in packs like hungry white wolves; but on the island's inner side was security.

So from December on to March the dependable Nest sheltered a vast assortment of vessels refugeeing out of the Ohio and out of the Mississippi and out of the

Wabash and even out of the Missouri; queenly side-wheelers that could turn in their own lengths almost; brisk stern-wheelers from smaller feeder-streams; excursion boats, wide in their beams and roomy in the guards; towboats, tugboats, ferry-boats, transfer boats, wharf-boats, coal barges; fishing-boats draped with idle nets; gravel barges, lumber-flats, yawls; joe-boats, which were trading scows; showboats, which were floating theaters; snag-boats, which were Uncle Sam's perambulating dentists designed for yanking at the sunken menaces to navigation; attendant john-boats, which in the bayou country farther south would be *bateaux;* all sorts and all manner of boats. There would be other government craft, including lighthouse tenders, steam-dredges, supply-boats, portable boarding-houses for construction crews. And there would be hibernating shanty-boaters by the gross and the great gross.

These were the nomads of local waters, the aquatic gipsies who lived on board with their families and paid neither rent nor taxes nor lease fee to anyone whatsoever, but got their provender, or the main part of it, out of a prodigal stream, and, when minded to look on new scenes, just cut loose and let 'er drift awhile, independent and free as the mallards or the didappers.

A shanty-boater's main dependence was fish—buffalo or channel-cat or perch or crappie. About once in so often though he had fresh chicken. But very frequently when a shanty-boater had chicken for his dinner it coincidentally befell that some waterside farmer's hen-roost had a mysterious vacancy among its residents; or at least such was the common scandalous rumor.

As springtime came on, the visiting fleets broke up and separated into single units, which went away, north

and northwest, and northeast, on their various businesses. Some of the shanty-boaters departed also, but enough remained to make two sizable flocks, one scattered along the banks, the other clustered in the mouth of Island Creek, handy to the sawmills and the staveworks where unskilled labor would be in demand, should some adult feel the urge temporarily to follow after gainful pursuits.

This was a race apart and as such remained, obeying the unwritten laws of its own making—mainly laws relating to the sanctity of trot-lines and seines, the catching of driftwood and the rights of squatter sovereignty with regard to favored moorings and good fishing holes. As for the laws governing shore-dwellers, those were quite different matters.

It was among these fellow creatures of his that Cap'n January had striven. Conviction that he was pursuing the wrong trade came to him a steamy night in September. In the twilight he had started one of his regular prayer-meetings on the dusty bank in the shadow of Island Creek bridge. His boat had been like a bread-oven, so stuffy and close. He could hope for no muster of listeners indoors, so he took to his skiff, with his black Man Friday to row him, and went ashore; and there the lightning-bugs were like winking altar candles for the service, and the bullfrogs and the droning mosquitoes joined in the singing. So, at intervals, did the bull-bats, flickering back and forth overhead.

His human auditors all told numbered perhaps twenty, including children and three or four mildly curious mill-workers drawn hither by the sound of his voice. For weeks past his congregations had been falling off; the novelty of seeing this redeemed ex-bad-man

engaged in clumsy missionary work had lost its savor. It was a stale story now and rapidly going staler.

All at once, as though moved by the same common impulse, his congregation deserted him, moving away by one's and two's and three's, until he was left alone with his black servant, in whose eyes was a look of half-fearful idolatry, which look also is to be seen in the eyes of well-broken bird-dogs. It is a look unquestioning and altogether devotional. It is based on the memory of past disciplines and on the confidence inspired by present worship.

Then and there, retreating from the scene of his humiliation with a head downcast, Cap'n January came to admit that this work was not his work. He would be serving his Master to better effect with the deck-boards of a steamer joggling under his boot-soles—that for him was the way out. He still had, out of past savings, a tidy sum laid by. He knew also where he might find discreet partners—men willing to pool their moneys with his in a steamboating venture on the river that he knew so well.

He recently had overtures from two of these men. He had rejected the project then, but now he would go to them and to sundry others of his friends and revive it. But a packet suited for the trade must first be found and upon convenient terms. No such packets being for the moment available, he prayed for one.

And while Cap'n January nightly engaged in this frank expression of the faith which was in him, Fate—if you chose to put it that way, or Divine Providence, if your belief happened to be as literal and exact as his—moved in a mysterious way its wonders to perform. Seemingly on his behalf, a very large and very black

man known as Slew-Foot Willie Tilghman became the chosen instrument of those Higher Forces.

This Slew-Foot Willie in his lifetime had great renown and in his death neither was he to be forgotten. His holds on fame were various and institutional. He was the strongest rouster on the Lower Cumberland; at least it was so alleged. He could dog-trot up a slickery bank or coast down one, carrying a full sack of potatoes or a sack of wheat on the broad of his back—which was most amazingly broad. Aided only by another ink-colored adept called China Eye, who was the Damon to his Pythias, he could upend a hogshead of tobacco and spin it on its chines to the appointed place, this in itself being a sufficiently hard stevedoring job for any half-dozen of ordinary hands, however skilled at handling cranky cargoes.

He was one of the best-natured individuals on this planet and one of the most willing, wherefore his employers held him in high regard since his example had so beneficial an effect upon the rest of a crew. He was an expert at lifting a tune and carrying it. In this also was fine merit.

For the deck-hands to gather on the forecastle, each holding in his hand a scrap of newspaper and pretending to read from it the words and music of what he chanted, while the boat swung to for an important landing, was all well enough purely from a spectacular viewpoint. Indeed it was almost as effective as having a "string band" or even a steam calliope aboard. But the chorister who could keep a quick-step measure going —say, the saga of "Stacker Lee" who killed "pore Billy Lyons" or the one about the Lovin' Kate, with its refrain of "Good-by, Katie, ef you calls dat gone"—he,

on the strictly utilitarian side, fulfilled a valuable function; it being a notorious fact that twice as much work could be got out of singing rousters as out of glum ones.

Furthermore, this picturesque person actually drew trade. Other things being equal, patrons booked passage on the Smithland Belle where they could behold the smiling giant whose shoulders were too wide for any coat, whose feet were too big for number twelve brogans, and so he must go barefooted or else wear shoes fashioned to his own special last. Finally, there was humor in hearing a darky of such proportions called "Willie," and that was what First Mate Gillie Ballowe, whose particular pet he was, generally did call him.

For the present the Smithland Belle was trading in alien waters. It was in the middle of the autumnal dry spell, a greatly prolonged dry spell. So the Cumberland, which notoriously is a shoaly stream, practically was closed to navigation, and on the Ohio and in the middle stretches of the Mississippi the regular packets had gone out of commission, their places being taken for the time being by the mosquito fleets, so-called, which had been withdrawn from lesser side-streams. Only the reliable old Year-Round River, as her habitués affectionately named the Tennessee, was open to commerce as usual, and her bends must be negotiated by careful steersmen for fear of a rocky bottom now much too close to the top.

That's why it was that the Belle, she being a regular skimming-ladle of a boat and drawing less than thirty inches, loaded, patroled back and forth between Cincinnati and Memphis under charter to the Red Collar Line. The intention was that until the drought should

end and the sand reefs be better covered, she would continue to traffic along that profitable beat. She was manned mainly by her own crew but carried Red Collar pilots and pursers.

Below New Madrid, going down, the Belle landed on hail to take along a colored family, and its domestic effects. Probably it was a dull season hereabout for colored families. This one, so far as might be judged, was moving merely for the pleasure of being moved; the same being a not uncommon dissipation among the race.

Seen through the haze of drifting pollen which betokens the peak of Indian summer, the warm October sun looked like a hot copper saucepan cover as it sank behind the bluff where the packet had nudged in. The verge reared above the level of the boiler-deck; the bulk of the steamer was below it. That bank would vanish after the December rains got well under way in the upper rivers and the turbid freshets came booming down—provided, of course, the dry weather did not hang on—but now it was a sharp and seamy palisade crowned with lightly frosted weed-stems and the spiraled clay watch-towers of many sentinel crawfish.

"Out there lively, boys!" boomed Mr. Ballowe, as the tip of the steeply inclined stage, like the fumbling clumsy feeler of an overgrown beetle, touched the soil, dislodging an avalanche of dusty clods. "Git on out there and snatch that there little mess of plunder aboard!"

His black hustlers swarmed up the sharp incline and slid down again, each bearing or convoying some item of householding equipment. Here came a breachy red heifer with a wild and rolling eye, and she hanging back

and bawling dismally at the breaking of the home ties. Here came a double armload of billowing feather-beds —for no colored family would leave its feather-ticks behind—and a bundle of gay rag quilts. Here came a harem of hens, their legs bound, and a protesting rooster and a squealing razor-back shoat. Here came a mixed lot—three splint-bottomed chairs, a hanging lamp, and a framed campaign picture of Blaine and Logan, highly decorative and only a couple of campaigns behind time. Here, under his own motive power, came the family dog. He was not a hound but he must have had hound blood in him. Neither was he a collie, although it was plain to see some remote ancestor of his had known about sheep. He was what in the parlance of the country was known as "just one of those plain nigger-dogs."

And yonder, back at the tail-end of the inbound file, came Slew-Foot, tardily dragging an article of bedroom furniture in shiny yellow pine. He wasn't singing, either.

"Come on with that there bureau," bade Mr. Ballowe testily. "Come on in here! Why, dad-gum you, Willie, ef you was stealin' bureaus you'd have one under each arm!"

Dragging his legs and with his great calloused soles slapping the deck-boards heavily, Slew-Foot wallowed across the forecastle.

"Whut you mean, soldierin' like that?" demanded Mr. Ballowe, with a theatrical flourish of his heavy staff.

"Boss man, I ain't solderin'—I don't feel jes' right. I got a swimminess befo' my eyes."

"Need a fannin' behind the seat of your britches—

that's whut you need," rejoined Mr. Ballowe, but there was no threat in it and no venom. Such language was conventional and expected.

"First time yet I ever caught Willie tryin' to rat on me," said the mate to the mud-clerk as they ascended the forward companionway. "Well, that's whut comes of pamperin' 'em. You start in to pamperin' and sooner or later you've got a spoilt nigger on your hands."

"Ain't that the shoutin' truth!"

But Mr. Ballowe's favorite was not malingering. When supper hour came and the slush-cook brought the evening ration down to the deck gang and its members hunkered in a close circle to enjoy it—coffee in a huge blackened pot, chunks of cold left-over meat and loaf-ends of stale bread on one vast tin pan, and a medley of leavings from the cabin dining-tables in the "All Sorts" pan—Slew-Foot ate scarcely anything at all. Somebody else got his customary lion's share. Before the stars were out he had crawled morosely away to bed, leaving a crack-a-loo game in full swing.

By virtue of seniority of service and for other reasons, it was decreed that he and China Eye, who was cap'n of the watch, should share quarters on the oily floor of a small boxed-off space aft of the engine-room, with only a thin bulkhead between them and the wheel. Their fellow workers catnapped almost anywhere—on the bare planking of the guards or on piles of freight if the nights were mild, under the boilers or in the warm ashes facing the open fire-doors when cold weather came. They snoozed by snatches. Five, ten, fifteen times a night, even oftener than fifteen times, they would be routed out for a landing.

Down our way they still tell the story of the rich but deluded Yankee from up in Indiana somewhere, who bought a controlling interest in an independent packet and on his first trip aboard her was outraged to discover that no proper housing accommodations had been provided for the deck-hands. His humane impulses led him to install bunks with mattresses and pillows and blankets, in the hull.

But when he came again the philanthropist was pained to note that the bedding all had vanished—it had been smuggled ashore and sold by piecemeal—and the ungrateful objects of his benevolence perversely were roosting on naked boards again. They preferred it so.

River men, both white and black, prided themselves that they were not as other men. A hard-faring life appealed to them, for at heart they were sailors even though not one in a hundred among them ever had sniffed at the salt brine or seen a tide roll in.

CHAPTER IX—*The Ghost of Slew-Foot Willie*

CHINA EYE got no drowsy answering grunt from a sprawled bedmate when he retired—with all his clothes on. Clothes, though, didn't count for much with China Eye. Give him money enough to buy himself about once in so often an expensive Stetson hat and for his reeled feet with their jaybird heels a pair of sleigh-runner shoes having fancy stitching on the pointed toes and ornate buttoned uppers, and China Eye cared not what rags might flaunt between those terminal adornments, because by the standards of his kind he then would be almost foppishly attired. He drew his nine-dollar John B., down over his ears and instantly was snoring.

But two hours later, when the call "Stand by, rousters!" sounded through the tunnel-like stretch of the decked-over hull, it was a wildly staring China Eye, with a skin faded to the color of wet wood-ashes, who burst from his retreat and ran forward, telling everybody at the top of his voice that Slew-Foot was dead. In his panic he almost plunged overboard.

"Lawd Gawd, I been sleepin' back to back wid a corpse!" He proclaimed it over and over again, fumbling at the conjure-charm that hung on a greasy string around his neck. "All dis time I been layin' dere touchin' a daid man!"

When he was calmer he bewailed the loss of his

friend in a melancholy and weepy singsong, but declined to return to the cuddy for a second look at the stiffened shape. Another equally sincere mourner was Mr. Ballowe.

"I might have knowed there was some good reason why he acted jest a little bit like he was layin' down on me," said that officer remorsefully. "Poor old Willie, him dyin' on his feet and me not never suspicionin' it! Well, anyhow, gentlemen, there's one nigger that's gone where the good niggers go!"

That, so far as the records would show, was the only eulogy preached over the mortal remains of Slew-Foot.

They carried the body down the river that night. Between sniffles, China Eye said he was sure Willie belonged to a buryin'-lodge at Nashville, which was the city he called home. So next day, in port at Memphis, Mr. Ballowe himself went up-town and found the secretary of the Memphis sister-lodge and himself paid for a wire to the Nashville brethren.

There was chagrin on the local dignitary's face when he appeared in the evening with the answer. It was evident he deplored the passing of an opportunity to give a celebrity proper obsequies with all the rites and the full regalias—he would have run untrue to his Afric blood had he not sorely regretted that—but the lamentable fact remained that the late Slew-Foot was no longer in good standing; he had been careless about paying his dues, a fatal oversight.

"Mist' Mate," stated the messenger, "I'm grieved fur to have to tell you 'at de deceased ain't come financial fur goin' on six months. Dat whut de responsin' telegram say. 'Cordin'ly I regrets to report 'at we cannot fun'elize him."

So a medical college at Memphis got a rather remarkable specimen of anatomy for its dissecting chambers, and the Smithland Belle turned her nose up-stream with a gap in the ranks. There were more gaps in the black personnel shortly. Coming away from Cairo it consisted largely of gaps.

For the ghost of Slew-Foot was abroad. With the dreadful "student doctors" polishing his abandoned bones, it was inevitable that his spirit should be uneasy, and it was natural that it should return to its old biding-place. It also was inevitable that desertions would swiftly multiply. They did.

Not that Slew-Foot's shade walked that familiar deck. But it did the next worst thing—in a manner of speaking, it talked. Even superstition has its limits; no nervous colored person came right out and openly declared that he saw the apparition, but at least one swore he heard it and in this case a single witness's word was as good as a hundred witnesses' words. The terrible news spread and worked immediate damage to morale and discipline.

He who bore testimony was a lanky yellow fireman. Since China Eye stoutly refused to tenant the snuggery behind the engine-room where for so long he had been so comfortably established, this mulatto, who was of stouter fiber or thought he was, preempted it for his own. He emerged therefrom shortly and with great haste. In awestricken tones he called the second engineer into consultation.

"Mist' Wilkins, please, suh, come yere to dis lil' door an' lis'sen," he urged. And when Mr. Wilkins obligingly had come: "Now, lis'sen hard, boss; don't you heah it—dat lil' mumblin', whistlin' sound lak some-

body suckin' his breath in? Boss, more'n a hund'ed thousand times I'se heahed Slew-Foot, sleepin' an' wakin', too, makin' perzactly dat same sound outer his throat! Boss, dat's Slew-Foot's ha'nt in dere! He had somethin' wrong wid him down in his swallow-pipes. Boss, dat's sho' Slew-Foot!"

"Aw, shuckin's, boy, what's ailin' you?" answered Mr. Wilkins. "That's only your imagination workin' overtime. Or—or else"—he hesitated, for indeed that curious sibilant small sound was recurring at regular intervals—"or else it's just some little something out of gear in the machinery."

"Naw, suh, you ain't foolin' me. Whut kinder machinery is dey would be mekin' noises lak dat? Boss, I'se th'ough wid dis spot fur good an' ever!"

"Well, keep that big blabby mouth of yours shut, then," counseled Mr. Wilkins. "Else you'll have all the other niggers stampedin' off."

The fireman promised that he would, but it was not in human nature that he should—or could. He was one of the truants who went ashore at Cairo and he had company on his flight. Some of the absentees did not even tarry to claim the wages they had earned, they dreading they might by maritime law be detained. And those of their color who stood fast were from mounting fear out of hand.

At the next sizable port the pestered captain paid off the few survivors and shipped an entirely new squad and by driblets lost it at Evansville, at Louisville, at Cincinnati. The Belle came out of Cincinnati for the return journey with a third set of strange rousters, and once more and swiftly the quitters melted it down to a skeleton force.

A fearsome advertising began to travel before and along with and behind the short-handed packet. She was a thing beset and, what was more, she now was marked for disaster. See how bad luck—bad luck attributable to no plausible earthly causes—was beginning to afflict her! Why, these troublous things were happening when she didn't even have a preacher aboard—and everybody with good steamboat sense knew a preacher aboard often spelt otherwise inexplicable mishaps. Day by day the evidence accumulated.

For instance, above Henderson on that same trip, suddenly and for no conceivable reason, she went momentarily beyond control and walked right over a fisherman's skiff and blotted out its occupant. The theory was that a wheel-bucket must have hit him, for he never came up. Next morning, in front of Shawneetown—and it as pleasant an October day as you'd ever care to see, with no wind stirring, not so much as a puff, mind you—one of the smoke-stacks toppled over, taking its companion stack with it; and the second, in its thunderous fall, smashed a hog-chain brace and that let the tight-coupled bow and stern down flat, and instantly transformed her into a bewildered, blundering, poor old muley-cow, most unsymmetrical and awkward.

They got the dehorned Belle to bank and made repairs at heavy costs in time and money; and while the foundrymen and riggers were busy, the lately enlisted outfit evacuated her practically in a body. With a fourth deck crew—the fourth in a harassing fortnight—she resumed her course. After that, nothing really significant happened for upwards of a week, and her upset officers breathed a bit easier, for it was a recognized fact that accidents went in pairs.

But then, alongside Island Number 10 and in broad daylight at that, she had to go blundering out of her lane to step all over a raft of saw-logs, traveling south with the lazy current. One big poplar butt resented this absolutely unprovoked assault and bit back, and behold, there she was with a long gash pronged in her bottom. They patched her temporarily and nursed the punctured leaky invalid up-stream to the nearest dry-docks—and then the ship-carpenters fell to and reconditioned her; and a lawyer for the relatives of the drowned fisherman came bustling down from Henderson and slapped a libel on her for a damage suit in the federal court. But after the boatwrights had finished and after the claim of those bereft heirs had been settled by compromise, she stayed on, released from her charter and still bound by slack water from her home ranges.

Even before that time, though, her pestered owners —she belonged to Nashville parties—lost heart altogether, because by now they realized that with her present ill fame and the long tally of her recent misadventures against her, it would be mortally impossible to hire any more roustabouts even had they had in this dullest of seasons anywhere to send her. After dark the colored population resolutely avoided the stretch of shore where she lay in expensive idleness. She needed no watchman to protect her from pilferers.

In desperation these Nashville people put a selling figure on their property complete with her equipment, just as she stood. It was a ridiculously low sum, they claimed, and so it was, her original cost considered. Whereupon there was vouchsafed the miracle of an answer to persistent prayer. Cap'n Tip January and associates stepped in and bought for cash.

CHAPTER X—*Faith with Works*

THE Prayin' Mate had his bargain now. Promptly he renamed her. That was almost the first step taken by him after title passed. The name was of his own choosing, those affiliated with him concurring, although they contended, some of them, that it seemed a mighty peculiar, not to say a downright freakish name for any craft to be wearing. But he had his way about it. Cap'n Tip January usually had his way. The Smithland Belle became the Promised Land, with golden letters on her pilot-house to proclaim it, starboard and port.

But getting a smart packet for half her true value was one thing and getting black men to sign on for service with a boat of such unsavory reputation was, as certain Doubting Thomases took occasion to point out, quite and altogether a different matter. There again Cap'n January went ahead and exercised his own discretion.

To start off with, he might count definitely upon a solitary recruit, and this one you probably would think seemed poor enough material for the nucleus of a whole corps, seeing it was none other than that self-same little hunchbacked negro who had during these seven months past been the cap'n's faithful shadow. He was of a complexion suitable for a shadow, being inky black, but when you said that much for him you had, by the estimation of many, said practically all there was to say.

However, the cap'n immediately sought the professional aid of an outside ally—a specialist, as it were.

Domiciled in a forlorn shack in the forlorn quarter known as Frogtown was a twisted, shrunken, limpy brown-skinned woman of great age. She lived there alone—you bet she lived alone!—for she was a hag-woman. She brewed spells; she told fortunes and cast crude horoscopes; she sold love-philters, and if displeased she could put the evil eye and the bad mouth on you; at will she could bewitch you or at will unbewitch you. At least nearly all of her own people believed she could, which amounted practically to the same thing. Numerous white people believed so, too, in a shame-faced half-skeptical fashion.

Cap'n January paid a visit to the shunned cabin of this fragile antique, and presumably he crossed her shriveled palm with silver. At once, by that swift grapevine telegraphy which has been called the African Underground, the word spread that on a given date and at a certain mystic hour, to wit, twelve P.M., Mom Lou, the Hoodoo Doctor, would wrestle with the ha'nt of Slew-Foot Willie Tilghman on his own grounds, pitting her black arts against his supernal powers.

When that appointed midnight rolled around, a large crowd, almost exclusively made up of quivering and apprehensive colored folk, were gathered under the winking stars on the high bank above the moorings of the rechristened craft—but with a good safe margin of land intervening and with abundant avenues of retreat behind them. From that horizoned eminence and that sure distance, the audience in a sort of tremulous silence watched and bided—but did not have long to bide.

Prompt on the stroke of the town clock in the spire of the First Baptist Church, Cap'n January showed against the sky-line on the hurricane roof. He was escorting the venerable Mom Lou. To the assemblage their figures stood out in strong relief, for the boat was brilliantly lighted throughout—lamps going in the cabins and quarters, lanterns gleaming and torch-baskets flaring everywhere on the decks, the two kerosene search-lights swung about to throw broad shafts of illumination rearward along her main freight spaces.

With the white man trailing a few paces behind, the crone, walking backwards, and bent double like a fish-hook and all the while making strange gestures and mumbled exhortations, made the circuit of the empty boat, shuffling from pilot-house to texas, thence on to the lower levels, until after twenty minutes of agonizing suspense she reached the entrance to the little compartment behind the silent engine-room.

A loud gasp arose from the multitude as boldly she entered there, her companion waiting outside, and next a kind of vast muttery groan when she reappeared in sight, bearing now an iron pot in which was something that smoldered and smoked and threw off pungent unfathomable smells. With a forked stick she prodded the depths of her caldron, so that what was in it blazed up with a dull reddish flame. Holding it by its bails, she swung it to and fro, and pennons of smoke formed about her stooped head, she meanwhile engaging in a broken-legged and distorted dance. Her voice ascended shrilly, and the tongue in which she sang was to every hearer an unknown tongue.

After a little came the climax of these unholy ceremonials. She ceased her chanting and she laid aside

the stinking pot and the fagot; and standing rigid and still, she motioned a bidding to Cap'n January. At that he unhooked a fire-ax from its supports against the nearest bulkhead and then, his strokes sounding clamorously through the hush, he chopped up a deck board. In the cavity thus provided, the cripple placed a little black object which she drew from a fold of her skimpy skirt. But the huddled onlookers knew what that was —a conjure-bag containing no telling what ghastly and horrid portents—and they held their breaths until it had vanished.

Cap'n January replaced the splintered plank-end, and Mom Lou took up the paraphernalia of her unhallowed calling and after conferring briefly with her employer she toiled ashore, bearing herself with the air of one who satisfactorily has completed a difficult contract, and those nearmost to her scrooged back to make wider the pathway for her as she silently crept on past them into the blackness which swallowed her up from their fascinated eyes.

It was the voice of her late helper, sounding loudly, which brought the thralled spectators all facing front again.

"Listen to me, you-all," the cap'n was saying. "You jest now seen whut's been done. Now I'm goin' to tell you whut she jest now told me. She told me that she'd satisfied Slew-Foot's ha'nt; that she'd sent it away where it came frum fur good and all; that never ag'in would it come back here botherin' anybody, white or black, on this here steamboat. That's whut she told me. I believe her. And I reckin you-all believe her, don't you?"

A half-hearted chorused assent was the answer.

"Seems like some of you ain't dead shore yit," resumed the speaker. "Well, ef that's the way any of you feel, I've got a way, I reckin, to convince you. Tomorrow evenin' I'm goin' to have a patched-up crew on board here and I'm goin' to git up steam in the boilers and run this boat up-river on a free excursion fur you colored people. It won't cost you a red cent. Bring your picnic suppers along with you and have a good time—the boat's yours till you git back home again. We'll start about four o'clock and we won't git back till after it's good and dark.

"And all the while you're on board I want you to be on the lookout for anything that's wrong or the least bit out of the way. You kin send a picked delegation down here to the engine-room to listen fur the noise that some people have been claimin' all along wuz Slew-Foot breathin' hard in his sleep; or you kin all come. That part's fur you to decide. And ef any one of you hears that noise, why, then I'm the biggest liar in seven counties"—a shaky laugh from shoreward at this—"and that old woman's a fraud and a worthless old cheater.

"But ef you don't hear it and ef you don't none of you see anything wrong, I want you to come straight back and spread the word amongst the rest of you-all in this town that this here packet of mine is cured of whut they say has been ailin' her. That's all I'm askin' you to do. Remember, four o'clock tomorrow evenin' and a nice moonlight ride on the river free to everybody that behaves themself!"

Now, when the word of these highly unorthodox proceedings came by roundabout and possibly exaggerating avenues to Pastor Otho W. Sheets, that godly

gentleman was shocked to the innermost depths of his being. He was minded publicly to remonstrate with the white conspirator who had dared to defy all proper conventions by instigating them. Cap'n January's past repute as a man of violence did not deter him, for, be it said to his everlasting credit, the Reverend Mr. Sheets in the discharge of his duties feared neither mortal nor demon. But when, in the dual capacity of citizen and clergyman, he went to seek out the man and scold him, the Promised Land already had cleared on her first trip.

Mr. Sheets did not forego his purpose; merely he postponed it, contenting himself in the meantime with preaching from his pulpit on the ensuing Sunday a sermon in which, dealing with the scandalous affair, he used such terms as "superstitious claptrap" and "ghastly mummery" and "disgraceful gibberish" and "infernal tomfoolery." Indeed, he used much stronger words than any of these. He doubted whether any man who employed such incredible means to attain any end whatsoever could rightfully lay claim to being regenerated out of his prior evil-doings. He said as much. The Reverend Mr. Sheets was indeed greatly wrought up and plainly did not care who knew it, either.

His deferred meeting with the arch-offender took place on the street some two weeks later, he in the interval nursing his wrath to keep it warm. If he expected signs of either resentment or penitence from the other, then there the minister suffered a disappointment. With a cryptic semitolerant look on his weather-beaten face, Cap'n January heard him out almost to his well-rehearsed climax. It was the repetition for the third time of a certain phrase which finally moved the Prayin' Mate to interrupt.

"Hold on, reverend," said the latter then, "you've got me wrong there. I don't claim to be a God-fearin' person a'tall."

"But—but your open confession—the repentance that has been attributed to you, the—"

"Jest one minute, please. I ain't afeared of the God I worship. I ain't quarrelin' with people who do fear Him, but since that night last winter when I fust seen the Light to walk by, I ain't never feared Him, not fur a single second I ain't! He's brung me peace and comfort and He's answered my prayers and put me in the way of doin' the job I'm best fitten' to do, but He ain't never yit done nothin' to make me skeered of Him. And I'll bet you He never does!

"And here's another thing I'd like fur you to remember: Maybe there's some folks that blame me fur not joinin' in with your church or else somebody else's church. Well, I don't aim to. I've figgered it out that my own kind of religiousness is the best kind of religiousness there is fur a feller built the way I am, and so I don't propose to question any other man's belief nor interfere with it. And without meanin' no disrespect to you, nobody's goin' to interfere with my private doctrine—ef you kin call it that.

"I've quit cussin'-out the bunch of niggers that I'm mate over now. I've found out I kin handle 'em without it. But ef my second mate wants to bulldoze 'em the way he's always been used to doin', that's his look-out. And I'll say this to you: In regard to this here powwowin' of mine in connection with that there old nigger woman, which you've just been oratin' about that so high and mighty—well, I'll jest state, speakin' along them lines, that you won't find a more contenteder

or a more easy-minded bunch of niggers on any boat anywheres, in this port or any other port, than you'll find on my boat that's layin' down there at the wharf-foot yonder after havin' finished a mighty satisfactory money-makin' trip. So whut I claim is that the means have done justified the end, ez the feller says."

The outraged preacher was moved to interject something of a strong nature here, but his rage made him sputter, and Cap'n January took advantage of the sputtering to press his point further.

"I take it, reverend, that you believe, same ez I do, in faith; but that you also believe faith without works don't amount to much sometimes?"

There was an affirmative but a hostile snort at this.

"Well, then, to begin with, I had the faith. It's been justified. But I likewise also seen in advance that dealin' with a lot of crazy darkies I'd have to produce a few works."

"Do you have the audacity so to call that sacrilegious performance which, as I am reliably informed, took place ten days ago on the river-bank not three city squares from here?"

"Well, not exactly. That mostly was fur effect, reverend. Jest strictly between us two, and trustin' to your sense of honor that it won't go no further, that wuz done purty much fur the general effect. You wuz raised down here, reverend—you know yourself whut these black folks, most of 'em, is like? Now, then, reverend, still speakin' in confidence, I'm goin' to let you in on a little secret. The main part of my works consisted of me slippin' down to that there steamboat of ours after we'd about decided amongst ourselves to buy her, and whilst she still wuz up out of

water on the drydocks—slippin' down under her one evenin' when there wuzn't nobody about, and me totin' a draw-knife and a jack-plane and an adz and one tool and another in a bundle under my arm, and jest alterin' the shape of a rudder the least little bit. You'd hardly notice it now ef you wuz to see it, but, reverend, it cured that there rudder of makin' a certain little complainin' whisperin' swishy sound, like a nigger with the chronic asthma whistlin' to himself in his sleep.

"Well, good-by, reverend, and I hope there's no hard feelin's betwixt us. Come along and take a trip with me some of these days as my guest, and maybe we'll get closter together on some p'ints than we appear to be now."

CHAPTER XI—*The Injun Duel*

AWAY back yonder some of the Five Tribes—notably the Choctaws and the Chickasaws—had a way of their own for disposing of a quarrel between two members of the same nation.

Since the white man had not yet brought lawsuits and other boons of civilization among them, but only his whisky and his Bibles—but more of the former than the latter—these poor benighted savages did not know enough to know anything about the advantages of prolonged litigation. Besides, they were too ignorant and too stubborn to carry their differences to a court-house even if they'd had a court-house to carry them to. And they were too sane to try to involve their families or their personal partizans in the controversy. They just fought it out, man to man, weapon to weapon, according to a hallowed code of the wilderness.

The traditional way of it was this: First the disputants went before a tribunal of the older and serious men, and either man had a hearing. He stated his grievance, and the elders, having heard both sides, weighed them, and arrived at a verdict—usually a compromise verdict—which they set forth at a full council of all the warriors. Sometimes the adversaries accepted this judgment and abided by it and ceased to be adversaries, but if they didn't—if the thing which had embroiled them called, as they saw it, for the shedding of blood—then it was settled after a sterner fashion.

In the river were many islands, big islands, little islands and also those much littler islands which the whites called "tow-heads." An island would be agreed upon, by preference a small one but always one dense with timber and brush or with canes. At a certain time the enemies would be landed on the chosen island, this man up here at the top of it, that man there down at the tail. They would be similarly armed, with a bow and one arrow apiece or possibly, in later times, a gun with one charge of powder and lead for it; with a knife apiece; with a tomahawk or else a war-club, as had been decided. Each was stripped to his breech-clout and his moccasins. He might paint his naked body or not as he chose. Generally he had his body painted, for the barbarian understood about protective coloration long before we did. His skin might be coated with green paint or with some ashy-gray compound or with a nicely blended mottle of reds and yellows; that depended largely upon the season of the year.

Having landed, these two promptly would dart away into the undergrowth, and the hollowed-out wooden canoes which had brought them here would draw away and leave them. The foes then were free to practice their best wiles, their trickiest, shrewdest plots of single-handed forest stratagem. And thereafter that little island was theirs and theirs alone, until one or both of these men died.

It was an argument to the finish. Such was the rule always. The canoemen—you might call them the seconds—circled the shores, standing away at a distance, during a given length of time. It might be twelve hours or it might be twenty-four. If at the end of that time no victor had emerged from the bushy covert, perhaps

wounded and drained and exhausted, or, more rarely, unscathed and sounding the triumphant yell with all his might, the patrols paddled in and went ashore and made search until they found the bodies. Frequently they found them where the matched pair rushed together and strove and fell in their final hacking, stabbing grapple.

There might be one survivor or none; never were there two. But whether one survived or neither, that ended it for good and all. There were no hard feelings on the part of friends or kinspeople or members of the same gens.

Every tribe which practiced it had its own separate name for this fatal game of combat, but the white settlers called it by a common name. Long after the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Cherokees and the lesser nations had been driven forth out of the pleasant valleys of their ancient inheritance, the earlier settlers along those Southern rivers spoke familiarly of Injun duels. Once in a great while the descendants of the frontiersmen still speak reminiscently of this institution of the dispersed aborigine.

Now, there was one particular stretch along the Tennessee where memories of the pioneering time were likely to live on. It was the stretch where the Shemwells inhabited one shore and the Hineses the opposite shore, so that between them was the river and a hatred which formerly had been as deep as that river and as strong. Life along here was elemental and pretty crude as measured by most modern standards. Steamboats provided the one dependable means of communication with the towns above or the towns below, and already some people were saying that steamboating had become old-fashioned and eventually was bound to pass

out. A feud would have a good chance to last here. This Shemwell-Hines feud had lasted. It still lingered, no longer sparkling up in homicidal forays and homicidal reprisals, but smoldering along. At least, though, the hostile clans had one thing in common if they had none other. They made their own raw whiskies and themselves they mainly drank the same.

Every December, starting the week before the beginning of the holidays, the Oscar J. Hooks made her great jug trip. It was much more than an ordinary trip; it was special and extraordinary. Setting out, she was laden to capacity with jugs, barrels, kegs, demijohns, casks, bottles, cases of bottles, separate packages running up into the thousands. A smell as of a million mingled toddies followed her as she went along upstream, following a zigzagged course as though she had gone tipsy on the heavy fumes of her cargo. In the three hundred miles of pleasant winding waters between Paducah and Florence, there were two hundred and sixty-seven regular landings, and she, carrying Christmas cheer to thirsty celebrants, called at most of them, besides quite a number not listed, so that she moved in a succession of sharply cater-cornered angles, back and forth, back and forth, more like a ferry-boat than a packet.

There was one twistiwise reach, though, where, comparatively speaking, she paid but few calls. The crew spoke of it as the Moonshine Belt. A certain smallish island was the diamond-shaped buckle on this belt. It was here that the Shemwells and the Hineses lived; the Shemwells on this side, the Hineses over yonder on that; and it was here also that Ripley Shemwell and Beauregard Hines borrowed a page out of the ritual of

the red brethren whom their forebears had dispossessed from these tall-timbered lowlands and these sharply cut, iron-streaked hills.

The private war between those two had more for a background than the seeds of an ancient disputation, more even than the grudge of their present commercial competition. It had a woman in it—a young and comely and wanton woman named Melissa Creekmer—and both these men coveted her and were willing to fight for her.

Straggling, fusing waves of emigration out of the older settlements beyond the Alleghanies and the Smokies had brought the original squatters hither—the Shemwells, a high-tempered passionate breed from the Valley of Virginia, the Hineses from that district of eastern North Carolina where they called an ox-cart a transfer, and a brier patch a pecossin, and a spade a spade, or on occasion a double-sublimated son of a spade. But the Creekmers and the Cranes and the Ryburns were newer-comers; they were poor whites of northern Georgia who, working north by west from their native saffron-clay ridges, had found congenial neighbors and a proper settling-place among these steep toy mountains. Their communal cabins lay in a narrow cove a mile or so back from the river.

From this spot Melissa, the beauty of their line, a pale-eyed, pale-haired, inviting person, worked her spell upon the sons of men. She dipped her snuff—a daintier habit, though, than the one her dam and her granddam both had, for the first chewed tobacco mixed with sassafras leaves and the second smoked a corn-cob pipe—but the black gummy stuff had not yet darkened her teeth. She likewise drank her liquor, but so far

it had not taken the bloom out of her cheeks and transferred it to her nose. She had been born with the wiles of rural coquetry within her. She was full-busted, light on her feet and light in her ways, and the smile of her sensual lips was a little red gateway to trouble.

Of those who fell in her nets there were three who became enmeshed for keeps—one Hines, one Shemwell, and one Dave Ryburn, her own distant kinsman, a cousin by virtue of some remote and more or less vague connection. But in the estimation of the clanspeople this Ryburn really did not count at all, he being a timorous, furtive body, whose craft and trickiness seemed sorry enough qualities when matched up against the shared truculence, the brawn, the bold and winning lawlessness of his rivals. If Rip Shemwell was the champion rifle-shot of those to be found between the long bend below and the short bend above, and likewise the champion fist-and-skull fighter, wasn't Beau Hines the smartest woodsman, the best hand with an ax, the shrewdest distiller of that clear colorless potable of the district with its bite like a streak of white lightning running down a fellow's throat and its kick like a yearling mule kicking you? On all such counts he was so. And if young Rip was the handsomest bachelor thereabouts—which he was—Hines, his senior by ten years or so, was certainly the wealthiest among all eligible widowers. What chance, then, did Dave Ryburn stand against either of these? Considerably less than none, by the common verdict of the onlookers.

Indeed, he eventually came outwardly to share this general adverse view. At the height of the three-cornered courtship, when it had grown hot and threatening, he altogether withdrew himself from that dan-

gerous competition, or at least so it would appear; and with fine professions of resignation to his fate, he assumed the rôle of a friend and well-wisher to both parties. Afterwards he was credited with having put into their minds the idea of deciding which of the two of them was the more masterly man.

This was true; the credit for it belonged to him. He went first to Hines. He broached the issue by roundabout, speaking awhile of various lesser matters, but dropping a hint here and a seed of suggestion there until he judged the ground was ready for farrowing. At length and after this fashion, he cut to the core of his notion:

"Beau, I been 'lowin' to myself that it's too bad you boys can't find some way fur endin' this here quarrel betwixt you without gittin' the whole section drug into it. Yes, suh, I been stiddyin' a heap over that very thing."

His hearer had small concern for the welfare of the section, being half-crazed from desire and half-wild from jealousy. He said as much. He said this:

"It's done come to a pass where I ain't keerin' none who's drug into it. I'm aimin' to git that Rip Shemwell before he kin git me—and that's all. I've done warned him, so it ain't no secret. He's goin' heeled fur me; I'm goin' heeled fur him." He patted a burdened hip-pocket. "I've done told him he'd better stay on his side of this here river—done told him, plain and straight, that the only way he kin git Lissy is over my dead body. It's too late fur talkin' it out; time fur shootin' it out is due and past due."

"That's whut's pesterin' me the most—on your account. 'Cause you're a good shooter, but Rip, he's a

better one ez you full well know your own self, Beau. And ef it should come to clost quarters—well, you're a strong savigorous man, Beau, but even so you wouldn't stand much show with Rip."

Hines regarded him darkly from under frowning thick brows:

"There's sich a thing ez a man bein' waylaid," he stated; "sich a thing ez a man bein' bored spang through the back whilst he's walkin' along the road, or else maybe whilst pullin' a skift down the river."

"Oh, I know you're the beatin'est one alive fur bushwhackin'!" exclaimed Ryburn admiringly. "Ain't I seen how cute you kin slip up on a wild goose? You betcher I have, more'n oncet. But ef one of you boys should git yourself ambushed, I don't keer which one of you 'twuz, it'd make hard feelin's fur ten miles along both shores of this here river. The way 'tis now, your folks ain't exactly friendly with his folks, still the old sore is a-healin'. One crowd kin crost to where the other crowd lives without bringin' on a rookus. You kin even mingle together and providin' there ain't too much drinkin' goin' on, you don't fuss with one another, which suits the wimmin folks better. But the way it would be ef sich a thing should happen ez the thing you jest now hinted at—well, that's whut's frettin' me, Beau. It shorely is.

"Mind you, I ain't sayin' which side would have my ruthers—you kin figger that out fur yourself, I reckin. And I ain't sayin' which one of you two boys I'm a-leanin' todes in my private feelin's; there's another place where you kin do your own figgerin'. But I been thinkin' to myself that ef only there wuz some way or other fur you to settle this where the one that

wuzn't the best shot could still git an even break or even a little better'n an even break and yit ever'thing be fair and square and aboveboard and not nary a chance fur him bein' blamed afterwards, why that would be about the very best way you could think of, wouldn't it, fur a fact?"

As though the expedient had just come to him, he smote on his overalled knee.

"By criminies," he cried, "seems like mebbe I've got it! Since you two air jest bent and determinated to tussle it out betwixt you, why couldn't you do it the same way a couple of hosstile bucks uster in them old bygone days that they still talk about? You know, whut the old-timey folks call an Injun duel? That'd be the ticket, shore 'nuff. And, by criminies, right yonder'd be the very place fur to do it on."

He pointed toward midstream; the pair were sitting side by side upon a drift-log on the bank during this interview. Out there, splitting the current, stretched that smallish island which separated the boundaries of Shemwell sovereignty from the boundaries of such lands and such waters as the Hineses claimed dominion over. It was considerably less than a mile long, considerably less than a quarter of a mile wide at its widest part, which was the part approximately half-way of its length. It was closely thicketed—weeds and sedges and willows along the marges; pawpaws and sassafras and haw and other understuff higher up upon its gentle slopes; a line of big trees like soldiers marching, going down its center from almost its upper tip to almost its lower tip. It had never been cleared either for cultivation or habitation. It was as the vanished Cherokees had left it. It had no special name then; to the dwellers

hereabouts it was just The Island and on the charts of the river pilots was denoted by a number. It was afterwards that people fell to calling it Snake-Bit Island.

Conniving Dave Ryburn kept pointing. "By criminies," he said, "that's shorely the place fur it, jest made to order!"

For a little space Hines said nothing at all. His face told nothing either. He had a face which singularly would have lacked expression were it not for a set of bushy and eloquent eyebrows. This face was broad and rather round and beardless, with stubby undistinguished features, in color a pasty grayish white. In the hottest summer weathers or the windiest winters the skin on it refused to tan. It was not a pretty face, but it would have made a remarkably valuable asset for a gambler to own. But then, in a way, Beauregard Hines was a gambler. When he did open his lips and speak, he proved that.

"It mout be"—he spoke slowly and reflectively and apparently without rancor for anyone—"it mout be he wouldn't consent fur to do it, me bein' the best man of the two when it comes to trackin' 'round through underbresh and the like."

"I 'spect he likely would ef you taken it on yourself to send him your double-dog dares."

"Who'd carry 'em to him fur me?"

"I mout be willin' ef you wanted me to, bein' friendly the way I am todes all concerned. I 'low to accommodate anybody that I like 'em."

Hines's brows came down again and knitted until they made an unbroken heavy black line crossing above the top of his flattened and unimpressive nose.

"You ain't foolin' me none with your mealy-mouthed

talk, Dave Ryburn Esquire," he stated, but with no heat in it. "You mout fool some folks, you mout even fool him, but you ain't fooled me. You think ef there don't ary one of us come back alive off'n that island, you'd step in and get Lissy. Well, ef they don't ary one of us come back you kin have her and welcome. Because I'm tellin' you now, feller, it's either me that'll be comin' back alone, or else they won't ary one of us come back. And ef it's me that comes back, then Lissy'll belong to me and ef they don't nobody come back it don't make no difference who she belongs to.

"Now then!" His tone had become sharper and more businesslike. "You take your foot in your hand and put out frum here and you go 'crost and you find Rip Shemwell and git him off by himself somewheres and tell him fur me that I'm sendin' him my double-dog dares to fight it out, Injun duel style, over yon'er on the island. And ef he don't, I'll name him and shame him everywheres fur a dirty coward and a craven and an aig-suckin' fice dog—tell him that. You bring me back his say-so, keepin' your own trap shut, and ef so be he's agreeable, then we'll work out the plans fur it, you bein' the middle man, 'twell we kin get everything settled."

Ryburn went, and straightway. No more ardent emissary ever hastened forth on any errand. What pliant arguments he used on Shemwell, what advantages he suggested, what innuendoes he sowed, remained his own business. In two hours he brought back the answer. The answer was yes, and the sooner the better.

Chapter XII—*On Snake-Bit Island*

NOW preparations marched swiftly. With the eager and obliging Ryburn shuttling to and fro, from one man to the other, the groundwork was laid as nearly as might be after the historic pattern. The rules were simple enough, either principal pledging himself by solemn oaths to obey all of them in all regards. One day apiece was allotted for exploring the island, for studying out its contours and its natural protections and its natural obstacles, for more thoroughly familiarizing oneself with a terrain already more or less familiar. Ryburn flipped a coin; it came up heads, and heads was for Shemwell. So to young Shemwell he assigned the first day. Hines accordingly took the second, and the third day was Ryburn's for touring the entire area painstakingly with a view to finding out whether either man had contrived for himself some artificial defense, some special ambuscade. He returned in the dusk reporting to Lissy's lovers that all was as it should be. They trusted him; they had to. There was none other in whom they might pool their trusts. Besides, they could understand, neither of them being a fool, how it might be to his own private interests honestly to maintain an exact and balanced parity between them.

The fourth day, then, was the day for the duel. Strangely enough, the secret these three shared was still their secret. No hint regarding their intentions

could have reached their kinspeople or their neighbors, else the news would by now have spread widely.

At the hour of the plan's culmination, it was necessary to depart in certain minor particulars from the remembered code of the scattered tribesmen. The duelists could not be landed simultaneously at the far corners of the island since one common second served them. Here a device mutually agreeable was hit upon.

Daylight of a windy, fair morning of early November was breaking when Hines and Ryburn set out from their shore, Hines sitting mute and almost motionless in the stern, Ryburn hunched at the oars. It was chilly out on the river where mists hung close to the water, but the air held a promise that with the sun overhead there would be warmth for all sheltered places. As a matter of fact, the day turned out to be almost as warm as a June day.

The go-between pulled straight across to an appointed indent on the opposite bank. Shemwell, tall and broad and sinewy, awaited them here. With a nod for Ryburn and a quick hateful glance for his antagonist he climbed in at the bow. He was in his shirt-sleeves with heavy half-boots on his feet. But Hines wore a pair of rubber-soled sneakers.

Ryburn marked this; he thought it told him something of Hines's intended tactics. He marked also that Hines was outwardly the calmer of the pair. To him Shemwell seemed nervous, but knowing the proved confidence in combat of the younger man, Ryburn inwardly diagnosed this as a sign of restrained eagerness for the moment of coming to grips rather than as evidence of any fear. Of these matters he took inward note while he was ferrying them down to where

approximately midway of the eastern side an outjut protruded as one sharply angled facet of the island's bobbinlike outlines.

There on the projection, he made landing for them. They got out on the shelving strip of moist verge, each still maintaining his silent gravity; and after making sure that his keel was well grounded, Ryburn also disembarked. He motioned to them and they, obeying regulations already mutually agreed upon, took station upon the little sand-spit, with a distance between them of some twenty feet. The dawning was well along by now; there was abundant soft clear light to see by.

They stood so while Ryburn searched their persons in turn. He searched methodically, thoroughly. First requiring of either man that footgear, shirt, breeches, hat even, be removed, he examined each article with careful fingers, feeling it, shaking it, probing into every recess, trying out every seam. Then, eyes and hands busy, he went over the partially naked form of either man, subjecting to the close scrutiny his subject's hair, his mouth, his ears, his body-parts and such undergarments as he wore.

This done, he bade them reclothe themselves, he standing vigilantly by as watcher and arbiter. Next he went to the beached skiff and fetched back a burlap bag. This bag contained the tools for the killing. Those tools showed through it in ridged outlines. He brought them forth—two single-shot rifles and two brand-new butcher-knives, their blades sharpened to keener edge on a grindstone. Upon either man he bestowed a rifle and a knife and also a single cartridge which he produced from a vest-pocket.

Without further instruction, they knew what to do. Hines tried the mechanism of his rifle, hefted it, flung it to his shoulder, then slid it into the crotch of his arm, shoved his knife into his belt and turning right-about went slouching at his leisurely noiseless tracker's gait south toward the heel of the island. Shemwell behaved similarly except that after girding himself he traveled north to its other extremity, splashing in and out of shallows where the shore-line recessed. His gait was swifter but less ordered than his enemy's. Having dispatched the pair on their respective ways the umpire reentered his skiff and retreated out from bank for a matter of forty yards or so. Holding her stationary against the gentle drag of the current, he might from there follow the movements of the two until they reached the points of land.

He drew a revolver and holding its muzzle aloft fired thrice. He grinned to himself. On the sounds of the pistol he had seen how Hines darted away from the open and took cover like a man sharp-set upon inaugurating some pressing business. Shemwell's initiatory movements he could observe longer, since Shemwell hesitated for a bit of time as though mentally rehearsing a secret campaign before he too disappeared from view beyond a weedy frieze.

Ryburn pulled out somewhat farther and set himself to cruising slowly around the island, sliding down one side, pushing briskly up the other. This, from now on, for the next eight hours unless sooner informed as to the outcome of the duel, was to be his function—to stand guard, to circle and recircle, to answer signal from the winner, if any were given by any winner.

Through the long forenoon while the climbing sun

brought out the land colors brilliantly, he did this. A mail packet chugged by, going up, also one towboat bound in the same direction; a negro fisherman paddled a dugout across below the arc of one of his thwartwise swings and passed to the mouth of a slough to run a trot-line. Otherwise the river was untenanted except by him, completing his slow orbitular journeys one after another.

The tardy and compassionate Indian summer of this latitude had made loveliness of that nameless little island. It sat on the solitude of the ruffled waters like a long ship with crimson and yellow and purple-toned sails; and the brisk breeze wrinkled and twisted its riggings and brought out added tints as the under sides of frosted leaves turned upwards to the strong light. Barring the restlessness in the verdure, a tender peacefulness possessed it. The only life which showed along its slanted flanks was bird life.

Fore and aft, the listening, watchful Ryburn patrolled and repatrolled his beat until his nerves began to fret and tingle under the suspense of waiting. His impatience got to be like a burning hot fever on him.

About noon he was rounding the head. He had just rounded it when he heard a shot sounding clear and quite near by, since it rode to his ears on the wind.

He was not to be deceived, though; he knew it came all the way from the south end of the battleground, which was Hines's end. He made fast oar-work getting down to the foot, meanwhile harkening for another shot. There was no second shot. When he came abeam of the place where he judged the shot had been fired and let her drift, there was nothing to be seen except a narrow ribbon of sand and beyond the sand

the barriers of gay undergrowth; nothing to be heard except the soft rub of the drooped oars in the oarlocks, the soft slap of little waves against her bow, the soft voices of autumnal leaves whisking and dancing together.

He bided and he waited, and the biding and the waiting were a fierce strain upon his senses and his sensibilities. Despite his dear wish that both men might be dead or dying, he began hoping for the sight of a living form emerging through that shrubby curtain. Why couldn't he hear something more? Why didn't he see something?

Ryburn had imagination, else he would never have bethought him in the first place to contrive this business. His imagination now laid hold on him and shook him; and soon, popping into his mind and popping out again to make room for a successor, were curious dreads, curious forebodings, curious nightmarish fancies.

By arrangement he was to stand by until four o'clock before landing and making search for results. Long before four o'clock he realized that he could not bring himself to make search. In fact, long before four o'clock, humping himself at the oars like a man in flight from an invisible but terrible pursuer, he was driving left for the mainland to spread the word and enlist volunteers for the daunting task which he, alone, dare not face.

CHAPTER XIII—*Wool Hat Strategy*

RYBURN last had seen Hines plunging past the briery wall of the southern spindle. Hines kept on plunging. He, the adept stalker, did not behave as stalkers usually do. With no regard for what noises he might make, he shoved through those close-set entanglements until he arrived at a rounded knoll, a very small and somewhat irregular knoll, which capped the low dorsal ridge of the earth at a place perhaps two hundred yards above his starting-point. The spot marked the beginning of the narrow ranks of sizable timber that rose along the island's spine. Though wild grass grew here and ferns and some plants and numerous young saplings, yet by comparison with the encompassing thickets, this dwarfed eminence seemed almost clear of vegetation. During his preliminary spying-out two days before, Hines had spent an hour or so atop of it studying its possibilities, perfecting his strategy. Now, having reached it, he knew exactly what to do and exactly how to go about doing it.

In the lower curve of the domed glade, very near where he had emerged, stood conspicuously a tall sweetgum with many sprouts rising from among its roots and half hiding its trunk at the foot. From a springy lower limb dangled a wasp's nest, abandoned now by its tenants. It was a rounded, grayish, papery, symmetrical thing of overlapping crinkled layers. Its cir-

cumference above was about that of an adult's skull; below, it broadened slightly in a pineapple-shaped effect. It swung at a height of some six feet above the ground.

Hines temporarily laid his gun aside. With a forefinger he scooped from beneath his tongue a fine, snugly coiled black fishing-line—so, you see, there had been a reason for his stubborn muteness in the skiff. Working fast but with no wasted energy, no false motions, he freed one end of the wetted line and lashed it to the pendant twig at whose tip the abandoned nest was affixed. Carrying the line back of the sweet-gum and, as he went, plying it out with his right hand—in his left now was the rifle—he stretched it for its full length, meanwhile keeping it taut.

When he had run the line clear out he stood at the far eastern side of the wooded opening, and there, right alongside in a recess where a great dead tree had been uptorn by some storm, was a splendid shelter all ready and prepared for him—a shallow sunken nest just long enough to hold him, just deep enough to hide his flattened shape; and it was floored with matted leaves and with lightly frosted but still green grasses, and it was enclosed by the spreading antlerlike roots of the overthrown snag. As he slid him down into this most perfect of natural ambuscades he took care to maneuver the cord so that it might not become entangled.

Immediately he was lying full length on his stomach with his elbows propped at the edge of the cavity and operating the line with a series of experimental twitches and tugs. The mechanics of the thing were so simple and yet so marvelously effective. A steady and sus-

tained pull would draw the leashed twig back, back, back until it formed an arc like a bent bow and the wasps' nest was quite blanked out behind the bole of the tree. Then a slight slackening of pressure would cause the nest to reappear inch by inch until it was fully revealed above the bushy hedge of undergrowth. He could make it withdraw slowly or swiftly as he willed; make it pop out suddenly or come forth cautiously.

At a distance of forty yards—and forty yards, roughly, was the diameter of the wooded ring—the illusion was most remarkable. There, you might have sworn, was concealed a human head playing at hide-and-seek with you—a head fronted with a grayish bleached face, being just such a face as Beauregard Hines's face was.

The head wore a hat, too. Now this was the clever fellow's crowning deceit of all—his supreme touch of smartness! Just before he began stretching the fish-line he had firmly fixed upon the upper bulge of the nest his broad-brimmed black hat.

He could wait; he could afford to wait. Being wise at woodcraft, he knew how to wait and in this case especially he knew the virtue and the value of waiting. Time would fight on his side; his rival's own youth would count against that rival. Sooner or later the impetuous younger man, driven on by his impatience and whipped by his lust for slaughter, would be lured into this trap so cannily devised for him. He might lurk in close protection for a while, might at first advance foot by foot; but eventually he would be coming to hunt out the enemy on the enemy's territory. So Hines, grinning to himself over the success of his artifice, had reasoned it, and herein was right.

Stealing, gliding, creeping southward, with side excursions to this side and that, but steadily drawn southward, Shemwell at midday approached the circular clearing upon the knoll. He was sure the foe could not be behind him or on his flank; his searching had been too thorough for that to be possible. So the foe must be in front of him, therefore he had not much farther to go. He was all darting eyes and twitching ears, all suspicion. Sure, he was the better marksman and the master at infighting, but then the other ranked him as a woods-ranger.

Back in the friendly bushes ten feet from the fringed edge of the glade, Shemwell squatted low and stiffened like a bird-dog on a point. Diagonally across the comparatively unobscured space, he caught a telltale movement. It was only a flash, still undubitably something over yonder at the farther side had moved. Through the interstices of his screen he squinted. He could make it out, a clumped something, gray and black, which flickered, then vanished behind a tree trunk, then very slowly edged back into view.

It might be only a cluster of prematurely dead leaves adhering to a swaying bough. If it moved with the wind and in harmony with the agitated brighter leaves about it, then that probably was what it was. But if it moved against the wind that implied it had a separate and independent life of its own—Shemwell was sufficiently versed in forestry to appreciate this distinction. When deer-hunting he often had applied this simple but reliable test.

In the former case, he need not particularly concern himself. In the latter it might mean that a fat gray squirrel, clinging to the bole of that tree, had flirted

its tail and was preparing to flirt it anew; then again it might be that a pileated woodpecker, a bird locally known as the cock-o'-the-woods, was working its way around the trunk as it probed the bark for grubs; and then yet again, it might be something else.

It was something else! For, as it slid farther out, the gray blob resolved itself for him into a pasty, peering face, and the black indubitably was the black of a loppy-brimmed wool hat drawn far down on its wearer's head.

His heart jumped for joy inside his ribs. Him that he hated had been delivered into his hands. He brought his gun-barrel up, forcing himself against his impulses to be deliberate. He drew his bead where the black cross-line met the flat broad gray. He fired, and there was no possibility that, so close to so fair a target, he could miss.

The hat jumped into the air, blown backwards ten feet or more. The gray face was gone.

The happy Shemwell cast his empty weapon from him and giving a lusty howl of jubilance broke through the bushes and ran forward until he was alongside the tree. He started a second howl and, half uttered, it cramped in his throat and for a long ten seconds he stared with stupefaction at the thing he had punctured —a foolish wasps' nest, its close-lain fabric of papyrus torn and riven where the bullet had bored it. He had been outwitted, trapped, betrayed. He was undone. Most inadequately armed now, he was practically at the mercy of one who would show no mercy.

From his couch among the roots, Hines withheld his own fire while he gloated. As though his brain were Shemwell's brain he could read what thoughts raced

through Shemwell's mind. For him there was no need of haste. He had his man, had him securely under his peep-sights, and the range only a matter of a very few rods. He could sate on a sweetened doubled vengeance in the picture of the victim tasting death by anticipation before ever death struck.

With the gun-stock cuddled against his cheek and his elbows pressing into the mold, he lay there motionless until Shemwell's lolled jaw snapped back to place and Shemwell's desperate eyes registered the design to dash off. Then his trigger finger began slowly to slide off the trigger-guard and to crook for the pull upon the filed trigger.

The finger never quite got there. A thing slender and whip-like, a thing vivid and sinewy, a thing of gristle flashed up and across from below and clouted him in the craned bare throat right where the blue line of the jugular showed beneath the corded skin. Of the four poisonous snakes which are resident in temperate North America the coral snake is the most sprightly in color and the rarest and, under certain circumstances, perhaps the deadliest. Usually it lives in the far South, but it has been reported as far up-country as west Kentucky and west Tennessee. This one had gone under a mattress of leaves in the dip of that little pit to escape the chill of the early morning. It had been disturbed from its drowse, squeezed upon by a heavy weight. Probably it was irritable anyhow, having the urge for hibernation upon it. So it squirmed its foreparts free from beneath a sleeved arm and struck.

The stinging was deep and true. As accurately as though discharged through a hypodermic, the full load of the venom had been deposited in a crossroad of

nerves on a short cut to the brain; and for Hines the paralysis practically was instantaneous and almost was complete. For the moment, even in that quick stress of mortal agony and mortal terror, he had still the will to slay, but the faculty to accomplish already was taken away from him.

Shemwell whirled and crashed away into the shielding undergrowth. Since he made much noise himself he naturally did not hear, behind him and in the opposite bend of the knoll, a threshing of limbs. That threshing shortly ceased.

The searchers, coming from the mainland and guided by the shaken Ryburn, happened first upon the dead duelist as he lay with only his head out of a slight depression which merely would have needed deepening to make of it a very adequate grave for him. Back again near the northern tip of the wooded rhomboid whither he had retreated, they came upon Shemwell. He was ranging widely and like a man possessed. His spirit had been torn to bits by the suspense, hour upon hour of it. He was in a frenzy. With his butcher-knife in his hand and he dealing stabs and thrusts at tree boughs and weed stems, he was plunging from copse to copse, now calling loudly upon his enemy to shoot him and make an end of it, now with blasphemy defying him to step forth from hiding and have it out face to face like a man. They had to overpower him by main force; then he somewhat calmed down.

But it was evident that something inside him had given way. All his bravado was gone from him. He was cowed and timorous and jumpy. He spoke by jerks; continually he kept glaring over his shoulder or

with quick frightened shifts of his head from right to left.

He stood more in need of being mothered than of being wived; that was quite plain. Nevertheless, Melissa Creekmer promptly married him. His present state aroused in her some distorted and twisted instinct of maternity. It was not in reason that she would be faithful to him. Nor was she; and when her tantrums came upon her she made a nice little local hell for him to live in. But anyhow she took him for her mate, which was a grievous disappointment to Dave Ryburn, the instigator of this whole affair.

CHAPTER XIV—*Trouble on the June Rise*

TO the eyes of a deep-water man she would seem an unlovely craft and one altogether unwieldy. As measured by every standard of maritime architecture known to him, she would be all wrong. Take her, there she was: a flat woodenware soap-dish supporting a top-loftical superstructure of planked packing-cases balanced one on top of another, with a foolish-looking, high-splashing flutter-wheel to drive her along; and she too tall for her draft, too flimsy to stand wear and tear and dirty weather outside, too everything that's neither nautical nor seaworthy.

For a fact, she did bear about as little resemblance to your typical copper-sheathed ocean-goer as a pasteboard matchbox bears to a brass cartridge. She was no more like a salt-water freighter than a pelican is like a bay-duck, no more like the average passenger liner than a flounder is like a dolphin. Her only claim to a family resemblance was that she did faintly suggest a certain broad-bellied type of harbor ferry-boat.

But she could carry dead-weight or live-weight in astonishing amounts; and she did have abundant passenger accommodations. She could run—and that was the most important of all—on a heavy dew, as the saying went; and to those familiar with her habitat and her uses, the City of Iuka was a splendid creature, sweetly modeled, true to line and purpose from the

gilded buck-horns that swung between her smokestacks to the jaunty rake of her fantail.

There was at present, though, just one serious drawback to a full appreciation of her classic beauties. For the time being, and rather like a large white goose brooding its nest, she sat on dry land, entirely out of her proper element and several miles removed from her proper river, which was the Tennessee. To be geographically exact about it, she sat on the lower tip of Cottonwood Bar; and soon young horseweeds would be springing up around her and the wild morning-glory vines would finger at her hull, feeling for a purchase; and for a crew she had a morose watchman, who led the life of a hermit except when derisive boys came up from town, pulling borrowed skiffs, to poke their fun and cut up their monkey-shines at a poor steamboat that didn't know any better than to be spending the summer ashore.

The worst of it was she was brand-new. On her maiden trip this sore trouble had come on her, and now the good Lord only knew what damages in sprained hull timbers and wrenched frame and gaped seams the hot suns and the hard sands might be doing. Her owner, Commodore Shep Withers, groaned as he thought of the business lost by this disablement. He groaned yet louder, that thrifty and pious man, when he figured forward on the probable costs of hauling her out and having her retuned and recalked when she floated in the fall.

There was another man who groaned—the man who had beached her there on Cottonwood. He did more than groan. Alone at nights he wept until the tears of his mortification ran down his cheeks and lost them-

selves in his gray whiskers. Through long sultry days he refused to stir abroad but bided at his small brown cottage in a room darkened with closed blinds and drawn shades against the heat; and for company in his misery had an unhappy eighteen-year-old girl.

This man was the late senior pilot of the City of Iuka. His name was Romulus Polk and the girl was his daughter Claribel, she being his only child and he a widower. Sometimes, though, his twin brother Decatur Polk came to sit with him and give him sympathy. The brother was also a pilot.

The Polks took to piloting just as the Rollingses and the Pelts and the Beardsleys did, and just as the Birdnetters, from father to sons, and from uncle to nephews, nearly always were captain-owners; but the Elmores and the Smedleys were engineers, and the Owingses plied with ferry-boats; while the Yarbros and the Evittses were mates, and the Doziers, through at least fifty years had been clerks treading faithfully in the ancestral track. To run the river was, with men of these breeds, more than a mere calling; it was a tradition They'll tell you that at one time there were eleven of the Pelts in active life and all of them certified pilots —Old Bill and Young Bill, Big Charley and Little Charley, Rebel Jim and Yankee Jim, who were first cousins; Boots Pelt and Leather Pants Pelt, who were bitter enemies; Curly Pelt and Slick Pelt, and so on even unto the third generation, who was a downy and fledgling Pelt not old enough yet to have a special name of his own.

The City of Iuka had been en route from the shipyards at New Albany, and she smelling of fresh paint and green oakum when she grounded. The Howards

built her for the Withers Line to take the place of the burnt-up Emma Katie Lucas. Everything about her was shop bright, barring only the whistle and the bell and the stag's antlers for the chimneys, these having been salvaged from the Emma Katie's ruins for the adornment of her successor, and the antlers had been treated with gold-leaf, regardless of expense. It was miraculous that they had been saved at all. People took it as a sign of future good luck that they had come unscathed out of that fiery devastation of more than a year before.

The reception was to have been an event—the mayor and common council, Dean's Silver Cornet Band and Gideon K. Irons Camp of Confederate Veterans, and the Masons and the Odd Fellows on the wharf along with nearly everybody else; and flags floating and an arch across the foot of Broadway with the words, "Welcome, City of Iuka!" on it in big red letters; and an ancient cannon, a relic of Civil War days, loaded and, as you might say, just panting to be fired in salute as the packet rounded to and swung in with the rousters clustered by the capstan singing:

"Oh, see dat boat come 'round dat bend,
Good-bye, my lover, good-bye!
All loaded down wid *Witherses'* men,
Good-bye, my lover, good-bye!"

And the multitude cheering, and old Congressman Guest there all cocked and primed with an address full of poetic fruit, flowers and fresh vegetables. And all the rest of it.

And it a noble picture that was doomed never in this world of chance to be unveiled.

Yet it had seemed the arrival might be scheduled to notch into the very nick of time with the hour provisionally fixed for the celebration. For the new boat was coming down the Ohio on the tail of the June rise, a regular and usually a dependable occurrence, and Commodore Withers with his wife and his daughters was aboard to shove her through. Perhaps he shoved her just a trifle too hard. That was the pilot's claim. Well, with the temperamental river so high, it was possible to make short cuts, to traverse the chutes between tow-heads, even to take her clear out of the channel and into sloughs behind islands which six weeks later would show their seamy dried bottoms all cracked in squares and oblongs, like so many huge caramels, with maybe a lazy thin yellow stream trickling by, but where now there was abundant water for anybody's steamboat.

And then, with the home port and the mouth of her own destined river only an hour or so distant, and it still the early part of the great day in the morning—just past breakfast time, in fact—she had to go ramming herself on Cottonwood. She was stuck fast, too. They found that out when they tried to spar her off and confirmed it even more definitely after tugs went to haul at her. The tugs did some desperate straining and yanking because the river was dropping steadily that day and inch by inch her bottom showed, and yard by yard the slick wet bar emerged from the fawn-colored waters. It was no use; the City of Iuka had become a definite fixture of a steamy warm landscape.

Long after the perspiring crowds had melted away from the river-front—indeed, a good many persons were partially melted before they quit that humid and

unprotected spot—Commodore Withers, his family and most of his crew came ashore in a dispirited file. The John J. Hodges had stopped by, coming from Evansville, and had brought them along.

Townspeople might seek the shade or the comparative coolness of indoors, but steamboatmen would tarry to get a first-hand version of so grievous a mishap. A sizable squad greeted the newcomers with eager questionings—technical men seeking the technical facts of the case. What Commodore Withers had to say was, in effect, an ultimatum:

"Gentlemen, I don't want to be too harsh. What does the Good Book say—'Judge not that ye be not judged'? But, gentlemen, there wasn't any earthly excuse for this thing. Broad daylight and the whole wide Ohio there for us to run in, and then Rommy Polk—yes, he was the man at the wheel—he had to take and jam her hard aground at a crossing where nobody in his good senses ever tried to cross before. He'll probably say to you that there was a thick fog hanging on the water. Well, gentlemen, for the sake of the argument I'll concede there was kind of a little mistiness; it did rain last night up above. But if there was enough fog to bother any man with eyes in his head, I, for one, couldn't see it.

"Gentlemen, it comes to this: Either Rom Polk has been working on the Tennessee so long he's forgotten the Lower Ohio—but you know as well as I do no real pilot is ever going to forget a river that he's ever run on, I don't care how far back it is—or he's losing his eyesight along with his memory. I can't have a blind man piling any more of my boats up on a bank somewheres. I hate to say it, but so far as I'm con-

cerned, that man's through. I've told him so. I'm telling you so. I've got to admit I'm plum' outdone over this day's sorry business. And my two girls are just heart-broken and no two ways about it."

There was a little murmur of commiseration; curtly the rich man acknowledged it. Stern-faced, erect, he crossed the wharf-boat to where his family carry-all awaited him on the slope beyond, his women-folk following him. From members of his household as from the world at large, he expected followers—docile, obedient followers.

Half an hour later, an elderly spectacled man came off the Hodges and walked up the blistery hill. He carried a gripsack; he had a framed document tucked under his other arm. Mr. Polk had brought his license home with him and that, to the judgmatical eyes of men of his own craft, was a sign and a portent. At the head of the graveled incline he met three of his friends. He slowed and hesitated, one hand fumbling at the little worn gold pilot-wheel which he wore for a charm on his watch-chain of plaited horsehair. He seemed minded to speak, but if so he immediately changed his mind about it. He nodded and plodded on, a solitary, abased figure.

"I don't know, I don't know," said the venerable Mr. Doss McIntyre, retired engineer, staring after him. "I'd 'a' said you wouldn't find a competenter pilot-house hand between Cairo and the Head of the Hollow than what Rommy Polk was. Ask me, I'd 'a' said he could 'a' run her blindfolded anywheres. So I don't exactly know what all to make out of all this here rigmarole. Still, boys, old age is a thing no human bein' can dodge that lives long enough."

"This here mix-up is liable to concern somebody besides the old codgers," said Captain Saul Rollings. "I live neighbors with Rom Polk; I know what's been going on. There's that oldest boy of Withers', Shep Junior, and a nice clever youngster he is, too, even if he is, to my way of thinking, too much under his daddy's control. Well, he's been sparking little Claribel Polk for it must be going on more than a year now. If I'm the one to judge, he's pretty badly gone on her, which I wouldn't in the least blame him for that because she certainly is one sweet little trick. And she's in love with him, too; anybody could tell it. I've been sitting there watching their little romance sprouting right under my nose and wishing 'em both mighty well.

"But this might make a difference between 'em. Because she's such a spunky little piece, for all her sweetness—a regular spitfire when her dander's up. And if she takes her daddy's side, which it's only natural she should, and if she believes he's in the right about today's to-do, which that would be natural, too, she's likely to hand that young gentleman his walking-papers, no matter if it breaks her own heart to do it. I'm sorry for Rom Polk—who wouldn't be?—but those youngsters are the ones I'm worrying about."

Captain Rollings' forebodings were to be justified, and speedily. That very night the rich man's son, coming to see the poorer man's daughter, was halted at the gate by a quivering little figure whose face flamed and whose voice shook with the vengeful, scornful indignation which possessed her. She told him he could not enter and why he could not.

"But, honey," he pleaded miserably, "but, honey, don't it count that I care for you so much?"

"There's only one thing that counts," she told him. "Until your father admits he's in the wrong, until he begs my father's pardon, until he takes back all the cruel, unjust things he's saying now, I don't want to see you again. And I won't!"

"But father's so set in his ways—you know that. He's got so much pride, he's so—"

"And what about my pride?" She fell back from him, eluding his entreating hands that stretched clumsily above the palings. Not before this had he tried to take her in his arms. But now he would have tried. That gate, though—it was between them. A greater barrier, one of her making, was between them, too. She drew farther away from him. "Good-by," she said.

"Good night," he said.

"I said good-by." She repeated it resolutely and was gone up the short walk, her head erect, her shoulders defiantly squared.

And if that night she soaked a pillow with her weeping, she showed a cheerful if somewhat swollen face to her drooping daddy across the breakfast table next morning.

CHAPTER XV—*Cap'n Tip January, Diplomat*

THE small tragedy of Mr. Romulus Polk's undoing —a great and overpowering tragedy to him and his, but small enough to the community at large—made less than a nine-day sensation. Before a week was out people had current topics to discuss.

At the end of that week, on a baking afternoon, the Prayin' Mate, as they called him now, Cap'n Tip January, came to port on the Promised Land, and heard the belated news. He heard it from this one and that one and by bits and snatches, for he was supervising the unloading of cargo, and besides, in the midst of the job there occurred one spirited interlude in which he played the major rôle. In fact he made some rather exciting news himself, there by moonlight on the cluttered wharf.

He was wearing the outward reminders of this experience when he started uptown next morning. His bony right fist was wrapped in a handkerchief, and there was a long but shallow gash above one of his eyes, and on the same side the cheek was so discolored and so swollen that the bulged skin there had a slick purplish cast to it like the rind of a very ripe eggplant. The bandaged hand kept going up to caress the sore places.

It was good and hot and vapory. Behind him as he turned shoreward the simmering waters lay flat and un-

wrinkled except when a foraging gar momentarily heaved its snaky body and long plated snout to the surface on a quest for minnows. On beyond, only the tops of the trees across the wide river showed above the belts of brooding heat-haze, and they had a cloudy indistinctness about them like a wash drawing of some trees. There was no wind but at intervals little vagrant puffs of air, which seemed to issue straight from the well-stoked firebeds of some invisible but near-by furnace, came off the river, punishing the toiling rousters of his crew. A swaying deck-hand passed him toting a piece of freight aboard, and the black man was shedding moisture like a hip roof in a hard rain. Cap'n January's own shirt was dripping and soppy, and the sweat ran down from under his straw hat as he climbed the dusty hill to Monkeywrench Corner, he puckering his eyes against the brazen glare.

On the narrow porch of the old boat store overlooking the two wharf-boats and the ferry-dock, a line of resting steamboatmen were perched, their feet making a more or less uniform pattern upon the railing, their spines curved to fit the supports or reared-back wooden chairs. Excepting in bad weather and late at night, an array of the permanently or the temporarily unemployed always was to be found at this rendezvous. It was their club, their outdoor gossip shop, their professional headquarters. Hot days they followed the shade around the building. Cold days they ganged about the hot stove within; and the proprietors and the clerks, going in or out of the office, had to hurdle their stretched legs.

The pedestrian halted at the foot of the porch steps and saluted the row of perspiry faces peering down at him through the banisters.

"I'm lookin' fur Rom Polk," he said. "Anybody seen him 'round this mornin'?"

"Well, 'Catur Polk was here little while ago, but he's went off somewheres," stated one. "You'll be more liable to find Uncle Rommy at his house than anywheres else. I ain't seen him down here a single time since he come ashore last week."

"Me neither," spoke up one of his companions. "Seems like he's sort of shunnin' the Corner. Seems like he must've changed just here lately from whut-all he used to be. Well, you'd know how that could be?"

"Yes, I know," said Cap'n January. He started on.

"Say, hold on a minute, Cap'n Tip!" The speaker's voice was keenly inquisitive. "Whut's this we hear tell about you havin' jest naturally pestled the stuffin's out of some big Yankee upstart frum somewheres over on the Illinoi' side?"

If, overhearing this, you had assumed that the stranger thus referred to hailed from distant parts, you would have been in error. You might live at the seepy edge of the opposite bank within sight and, on still days, almost within sound of your Kentucky neighbors, but by local interpretations you still were a Northerner and with no earthly hope of ever being anything else either. For this Ohio River was Dixie's top boundary. It was the dividing-line, as some inspired partizan once had put it, between hot biscuit and cold light-bread. It was more than geographical; it was emblematic of something.

Getting no answer, the inquirer was moved to amplify his question:

"How about it, cap'n? We hear that 'long about 'leven o'clock last night they was packin' him on a cot

off to the city hospital, and him just one big throbbin' ache frum his topknot clean on down to his toenails. That so?"

But the other, apparently not hearing, had passed beyond the corner of the boat store. Even in his unreconstructed days, before he became January the Prayin' Mate, and still was January the Man-Eater, he never had been the one to brag of his victories. He let the results speak for themselves, either at the nearest doctor's office or before the coroner's inquest, as the case might be—and several times had been.

At Mr. Polk's front door it was his daughter Claribel who answered the caller's knock. The greeting between these two was decidedly cordial. They were friends of long standing.

"Why, it's Cap'n Tip!" she exclaimed, and almost she hugged him, he patting her on her shoulder with his left hand. "Oh!" she cried then, "your hand's all tied up! And your face—! What did that to you, Cap'n Tip? What hurt your face?"

"That don't matter, honey," he told her. "I sort of rammed my knuckles ag'inst somethin' solid. And this here"—he touched his gashed forehead—"this is jest a little scratch that don't amount to nothin'. But I'm mighty glad to see you standin' the warm weather so well and lookin' purty as a picture, besides. My, my, how you've grown since I seen you last—jest shootin' up in the air, ain't you?"

"Walk right on in, Cap'n Tip," she urged. "Daddy'll be awfully glad to see you. He don't have many visitors these days—you see, he—" She fumbled her words, seeming on the verge of tears. "He won't even sit out on the porch where it's cooler and he can see

people passing." She sank her voice: "Honest, I'm terribly worried about poor daddy, Cap'n Tip. He just stays inside all day with the shutters closed, and sometimes for hours and hours he won't read or he won't talk to me, even, but just sits and stares at the wall like he was seeing a ghost or something. It's been pretty lonely for me this past week since that terrible thing happened, but it's ever so much worse for him. I'm awfully glad you came, Cap'n Tip."

"So'm I, honey," he said, and followed her across a skimpily furnished entry-hall.

The temperature of the small living-room was torrid and smelled of the varnish on the furniture. The occupant of it was sprawled in a cane-seated rocker, languidly wielding a palm-leaf fan. He was in his shirt sleeves, shirt sleeves being a sort of summer uniform in these parts, but since his shirt had a stiff starchy bosom to it and stiff wristbands, and the collar above it was of armorlike celluloid, the wearer might almost as well have been encased in a cuirass. His eyes, as he glanced up inquiringly, were eyes that had heartbreak in them.

"Hello, Tip," he said, with a sort of wan and listless hospitality. He got on his feet. His movements were slow as though he had rust in his hip-joints. "What brings you traipsing away out here to the far end of Clay Street this broiling day?"

"A little matter of business, Rommy," stated the younger man. "Somethin' I want to talk over with you ef you'll let me. No, don't go, Claribel! I want you to hear whut-all I'm fixin' to say to your paw. I'll take this chair here ef you don't mind."

He waited until the girl had perched herself on an

arm of the rocker with one bare plump arm encircling her father's shoulder. Then, without preamble, he went to the core of his errand:

"Rom Polk, I don't aim to harrow up your feelin's any more'n I kin help—I got a reason fur askin'. So tell me this: Is it true, as I've heared, or ain't it true that you'd been at the wheel fur goin' on twenty-odd hours stiddy when you hung the Iuka up on Cottonwood?"

"Yes, it is true," said Mr. Polk. "Pluck Sebree, he took down with a touch of summer complaint coming past Caseyville and I was standing his watch and mine too, seeing as the Commodore was so bent and determined to put her through according to schedule. I may 'a' been tired," he added protestingly, "but I'll swear to you, Tip January, I was wide awake. I wasn't sleepy. I wasn't dozing off. And whether you believe it or not, right along there where it happened was a fog you could cut with a knife, it was that thick."

"I believe it," assented the other. "I do more'n jest believe it. I kin prove it. When we pulled out that same mornin' early, whilst they wuz still expectin' you-all in with your new boat, it wuz foggy as the dickens in the mouth of the Tennessee even with the breeze, sich as it wuz, blowin' out of the west frum off in this direction. So it stands to reason that on the other side of the Point it must 'a' been still more denser. . . . Rom, why ain't you fightin' back? Why're you jest throwin' up your hands and quittin'? Where's all the spunk that you uster have gone to?"

"What's the use of fighting?" There was hopelessness in the speaker's open-handed gesture. "What good would my word be against his? . . . Tip, I'd been

with the Withers Line since I was thirty. And I'll be sixty-two my next birthday—if I live to see it!"

"Listen to me: Fightin' in a good cause is always a good thing. Rommy, when the Bible says the meek shall inherit the earth, I reckin whut it means is they'll inherit it after ever'body else is through with it. I ain't settin' myself up to dispute ag'inst Holy Writ, understand me—since last year when I fust seen the way clear before me, I've been takin' it frum kiver to kiver—but I figure it ain't wrong to draw your own conclusions frum whut it says."

"But how could I fight—flung ashore like an old worn-out something, with a black mark on my name as a pilot?"

"I'm comin' to that right now: Rom, how would you like to sign up on a good spry steamboat in the Tennessee River trade ag'in?"

"Whose boat, Tip?" He spoke with almost a childish eagerness. So soon as this, a rehabilitated self-confidence was asserting itself—was straightening his shoulders, putting a flush in his face.

"Mine, that's whose. Rebel Jim Pelt's been with us since we started out to give Withers a tussle on his own territory—he uster seem to think he owned it but he's learned better now—but Jim's quittin' us to go back with the Red Collar people ez soon ez we git a good man fur his berth. We jest sort of borrowed him off them fur a temporary accommodation, ez you might say. And you're the very man fur the job, seems like to me. You and me have run pardners on the river before in times gone by. I'd like mightily to see us doin' the same thing ag'in."

"You take me off my guard so!" But there was a

breathless little catch in the tired voice; the suggestion in those lack-luster eyes of a spirit rekindling. "I hardly know what to say. It sounds nice, though, the way you put it. It certainly sounds mighty nice—getting another chance so soon after what's happened!"

"Oh, daddy, it sounds just too wonderful to me!" And Claribel shot a glance freighted with gratitude at January.

"Well, we'll jest call that ez good ez settled then," said January. "I'll take it on myself to notify Rebel Jim that you'll be ready to step into his place next trip out. And there's another thing, Rom: Ef later on you should feel like takin' an interest in the Promised Land along with the rest of us, I think I kin fix that up with our crowd. So fur, the thing's proved up a good investment fur all concerned."

"But I haven't got the money, Tip, not to spare, I haven't. I own this house, it's true, but I couldn't put a mortgage on it—it'll be Claribel's when I'm gone, and I wouldn't dare not leave it clear and unencumbered. Besides, a rate war is a mighty expensive proposition sometimes."

"Who said anything about a rate war? There hasn't been no rate-cuttin' so fur, and ez long ez I have any say-so in the matter, there won't be none either. We set out to prove to Withers that the river is free and that there's business aplenty for one more opposition boat, and we aim to keep right on provin' it. But the main p'int is that you're goin' to take your regular turn at the wheel with us frum now on."

"He certainly is!" declared Claribel masterfully. A certain something about her manner gave inspiration to January.

"Say, listen, you two," he went on. "I've got still another little idea knockin' 'round in the back part of my head." He would make it appear, if he could, that this had been the fruitage of much thought on his part. "Claribel, I'll bet there ain't a better single-handed housekeeper anywheres in this town than whut you are."

"I'll take my oath there's not," her father boasted proudly. "This child can go down to the Market House with a basket on her arm and make fifty cents go further than you could with a two-dollar bill. And I do declare she's the beatingest one alive for thinking up tasty dishes!"

"I knew it! Then here's my other notion: Let's experiment. Let's make Claribel the first girl-steward that wuz ever seen on these waters—not a stewardess, because that's not a job fur her color—but the little commander of the kitchen and pantry gang, the lady boss of the whole shebang so fur ez buyin' the vittles and havin' 'em cooked and dished out is concerned. Dude Farrell's quittin' us, too, to open up a snack-house over on Court Street; Claribel kin fill his shoes, I'll bet you, even ef they are about a mile and a half too big fur her twinklin' little feet. It'd make talk. Yes, it'd draw customs, or I miss my guess."

"Now wait a minute, Tip, don't you think that's going too far?" protested Mr. Polk. By his ethics the thing in more aspects than one was revolutionary. In his day and time and station, women-folk never touched their hands to paid-for employment, so long as their men kept their strength and self-respect. A woman cast on her own resources might open her doors to boarders, might, without altogether sacrificing caste,

"take in" sewing at home, might live on the begrudged bounty of others, might even starve slowly to death in genteel idleness—and sometimes did. But this, now?

It was Claribel whose strong young voice cut in on his shaping protest. Perhaps Claribel was half a generation or so in advance of her own generation. Or perhaps Claribel, sensing what was in the brain of this gaunt benefactor of theirs, had a deeper wisdom behind her decision.

"It's not going a bit too far, either!" she proclaimed. "I'd just love it. And I'd be with you, daddy, and with Cap'n Tip, here, instead of being left at home alone most of the time. And, oh, Cap'n Tip, I want a uniform! I want a fancy cap and a little short jacket, navy blue, with one row of shiny brass buttons on it right here"—she motioned with her hand—"and another row on it right here! And gold braid on the sleeves!"

"That sounds like 'twould be on those nobby big side-wheelers they've got over on the Mississippi," said Cap'n Tip. "Them kind go in fur high-toniness regardless. Why, even the nigger barber wears a uniform! Still, while we're puttin' on style let's put on plenty of style—so the first female steward on record will be the first steamboater on the old Tennessee to wear fancy buttons and a nifty blue coat."

Whereupon this girl, with the air of one sealing a triple bargain, explosively kissed first her father and then, gently, on his disfigured brow, Cap'n January, and called him "Uncle Tip." From this time on all through her life she would continue to call him this. But he always would maintain that it was the other way around—that he had adopted her.

CHAPTER XVI—*The Other Cheek*

I RECKIN I'll have to put up with you two running over me in this high-handed fashion, seeing the odds are so heavy," conceded Mr. Polk. He said it in a tone of ostensible resignation. By contradiction though, his faded eyes beamed. "But see here, Tip, knowing you from old days like I do, I'm willing to bet a team of horses that something must've happened during the last few hours to make you tackle this mighty fine clever thing that you've just now done for me—for us, I mean. Don't think I'm not thankful to you for it. Because I am, Tip, I am. I'm beholden to you right down to the bottom of my heart. But whilst I never remember seeing you go off half-cocked, I've taken note oftentimes through all these years we've been friends together that you're a great hand for acting on sudden impulses. So come on and tell me, Tip—what was it that occurred? Because, sure as shooting, it must've been something."

"You're right, Rommy, and I'll own up you are," confessed Cap'n January. "Probably you'd 'a' heared something about it already ef you'd been stirrin' abroad. It wuz last night it come up. We wuz late gittin' in yistiddy, bein' heavy-laden—produce, it mostly wuz, and jest tons of it. I wuz shovin' the niggers up to top speed to git the main part of the stuff off, so's to have the hold and lower deck clear fur this mornin' when a big overbearin'-lookin' party that wuz fur overtaken in licker—and mean licker, too, frum the looks of

him—come meanderin' down the hill and, seemin'ly without no reason a-tall, started pickin' on one of the darkies—a skinny one they call Rack o' Bones. He wuz a stranger to me, this feller; I don't know ez I ever seen him before and I don't know his name till yit, because he didn't introduce himself beforehand and after the mess wuz over he wuzn't in no fit shape to be explainin' who he wuz or where he hailed frum. Somebody wuz sayin' today that he did come frum acrost the Ohio.

"I didn't see the start-off of the fuss. All at once another rouster come runnin' up to me where I wuz standin' in the lower wharf-boat and says to me that a lickered-up white man is out there interferin' with 'em generally and specially is threatenin' to beat up this here Rack o' Bones.

"Well, ef any of my niggers needs a dressin'-down I figger I'm competent to attend to it and don't need no outside help; and long ez they're behavin' themselves and not botherin' nobody, it's naturally my place ez mate over 'em to protect 'em—you know that without my tellin' you. So I dusted out on the bank and sure enough here wuz this man squeezin' that black boy by the nape of his neck till his eyes stuck out of his head, and cussin' him fur ever'thing he could lay his tongue to and makin' like he wuz gittin' ready to hit him with his fist. The nigger wuzn't doin' nothin' either—jest wrigglin' to git free and beggin'.

"So I pushed in betwixt 'em and advises him, civil and decent, to turn the boy loose and go on about his own business. There wuz a time, Rommy, as you know, when I probably wouldn't 'a' wasted any words on him; I'd 'a' jumped him first and asked questions

afterwards. But since I mended my ways I've aimed to walk humble and keep peaceable.

"Well, I reckin maybe my talk fooled him. Because he turned loose his holts on the nigger and started callin' me worse names and more bemeanin' names even than he'd called Rack o' Bones, ef such a thing wuz possible. Why, Rommy, he called me the onforgivable name—you know! And I took that also, though I'll admit it mighty nigh tore me half in two to do it, fur by then these two hands of mine wuz jest itchin' to rip his throat out by the roots." A tigerish look flickered across the speaker's bruised face, making of it a deadly daunting mask. "But I took it, ez I'm tellin' you now. Yes suh, I figger the way I taken all his abuse fooled him about whut my real feelin's wuz. Because then, by doggies, ef he didn't haul off and smack me on my cheek here! A lick with his clinched paw now, that would 'a' been different; but a slap with his open pa'm like he wuz correctin' a skeered child!

"Well, I expect there never wuz a white man more 'shamed nor crazier with mad than whut I wuz. And I reckin fur jest a second there never wuz another man standin' clos'ter to a sudden death than that there man. But I was bearin' in mind whut it says in Matthew's about whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek turn to him the other also. So I turned my left cheek to him and sure enough he popped me with all his might on that side and raised this big blue whelp that's still here; only now he done it with his clinched fist.

"Well, frum that p'int on I had to depend on my own jedgment because the Book didn't state whut a Christian wuz expected to do after he'd been slapped that second time; a man ain't got but jest the two

cheeks, has he? So I turned in and I worked on him till he wuz ready to be scraped up and toted off. I didn't have it all my own way though—he give me a right smart competition fur a spell and I guess ef you'd a come along past the spot after things quieted down, and took an inventory, you'd 'a' found all the evidences of a real knock-down-and-drag-out fight, includin' blood, hair, sweat, and the ground tore-up. Excuse me, Claribel, honey, that's jest an old sayin' I'm usin'.

"Well, anyhow, that's how I got the notion, puttin' one thing and then another together and addin' 'em up, of comin' on out here to see you and layin' this here suggestion before you. I says to myself, I says, 'Seems like to me Rom Polk has been turnin' the other cheek to Shep Withers about long enough and I'm goin' to tell him so and show him his mistake, ef I can.' And I reckin I have, haven't I, Rommy?"

"Tip," said Mr. Polk, blinking his eyelids to hold back a quick gush of tears, "you certainly have. And I'm never going to forget this, the longest day I live!"

There was a little sequel to all this; it is fitting that there should have been. It, or at least the pleasant beginnings of it, came under observation on a balmy, starry September night, which would make it a matter of two short months or so after Mr. Romulus Polk went back to his beloved river.

The Promised Land was chugging down-stream and she gunwale-deep with the varied summer products of a most fruitful valley; and Mr. Polk, his look being somewhat vaguely troubled, said this to Cap'n January, as the latter entered the pilot-house to share ten o'clock coffee with him:

"Tip, seen Claribel these last few minutes? I haven't seen her myself for two hours."

"Jest now seen her, but I didn't let on—I slipped right on past, lookin' the other way. She's settin' down here on the guards back of the texas."

"Alone?"

"Alone?—*huh!* Think that boy's goin' to let that girl out of his sight ag'in ef he kin help it? He's got a heap of lost time to ketch up with, that kid has."

"The point is, I don't want her to be neglecting her duties. She's still a member of this crew; you've got to remember that."

"Neglectin' 'em? By doggies, man, I claim she's attendin' to 'em! Whut better business could a sweet girl like Claribel have on a night like this than lettin' a nice upstandin' boy like Shep Withers Junior make love to her?"

He was naming an added passenger. That same morning the Linda Smythe, at present the flagship of the Withers Line, had signaled and halted in her upbound course and by yawl had transferred to the Promised Land a traveler who, to the surprise of at least two individuals, a father and a daughter, came aboard smiling and confident.

Immediately it developed that he played the part of emissary. From his sire he bore to Mr. Polk conciliatory expressions. Withers Senior desired that bygones might be bygones; moreover—and that, if you knew Commodore Withers, was an even more remarkable thing—he stood ready to make public retraction of certain recent accusations against his former employee; stood ready to make whatever amends and atonement he might for mistaken statements issued in

the heat of a grievous disappointment—altogether a most handsome apology. In short, the youth bore the heaviest and whitest of peace-belts, and Mr. Polk, his record being honorably cleared, could do nothing less than graciously accept them.

For the private ear of Mr. Polk's daughter young Shep also brought a message, and from the same source as the first one. By this most willing of couriers the commodore sent word that, as a born hustler in his own right, he would be most highly honored now or later, but the sooner the better, to welcome as a member of his family a young lady who having set out in the face of a foolish common prejudice, to earn her daily bread, had won his undying admiration and regard. To his praise be it accounted, the young man modestly refrained from reciting in detail what part he himself had played in altering the parental attitude. But then he had something better to do—he was, as the proverb might have been, making hay while the stars shone.

Mr. Polk, having digested his associate's jubilant disclosure, presently spoke.

"Tip, dog-gone your skin, I believe you've been conniving at something like this all along! Well, I can't deny that the child looked happier this evening than I've seen her look for many a day. But what I'm asking you is, didn't you start in with your low-down underhanded plotting right from the start? I wouldn't put it past you, you old scoundrel!"

Cap'n January chose to parry the affectionate accusation.

"Whut's your complaint?" he countered. "That kid of Withers' must have a blamed sight more backbone than whut some people have been givin' him credit fur.

He wanted something and, by all the evi*dences,* he jest naturally up and went after it and he got it. It took a boy with something in his spinal column besides corn-meal mush to make a stiff-necked old cuss like his paw is come down off'en his high horse and eat sich a large bait of crow-meat. Yes suh, the boy's got the stuff in him and he's done proved it to my satisfaction, anyhow.

"Besides which, ef it comes to a showdown—and I'd say frum the signs a showdown's about due—why shouldn't a steamboatman's daughter be a steamboatman's wife and raise babies that'll be born—or oughter—with the love of steamboatin' and the river in 'em?

"Jest between you and me, Rom, I jedge it's got fur along enough fur me to start thinkin' about whut my weddin' present's goin' to be. I'll say this—I kin afford fur it to be a toler'ble nice one. This here packet's makin' money like a nigger shovelin' tanbark; and outside of a cravin' fur custom-made boots and a special brand of chewin' tobacco, I ain't got many of whut you'd call real expensive tastes."

"Lawdy, Tip, you don't really believe it's gone to that point all so soon as this?"

"This is ripenin' weather, and on board a steamboat is a powerful good place fur a love-affair to ripen."

"But she's almost a baby, as you might say—and my only chick!"

"The way it looks to me, you're the one that's fixin' to act like a baby. Rom, are you prepared fur a little shock? Then, ef you'll swear not to let on to Claribel that I told you, I'll take you in onto a secret. She's followin' after the recent example that you and me both set fur her. Jest a minute ago when I slipped past

them two unbeknownst to 'em—though probably they wouldn't 'a' heard me ef I'd been beatin' on a bass drum, they bein' otherwise mighty much engaged—as I say, when I went on by 'em, he'd jest kissed her on this here cheek"—he lifted his hand in an illuminating flick —"and by doggies, Rom, she wuz deliberately turnin' the other cheek to him."

CHAPTER XVII—*An Episode at Pintail Lake*

THE gang at Starbuck's, back a mile from the river, were joking that comical old cooter of a Joe Sam Flint about his prized new badge and his ten-dollar diplomy, or whatever it was you called the fool contrapshun, just before this stranger young Gaul ran up, dripping wet and panting, with the word that his friend was drowned in Pintail Lake. Their humor was of a primitive but searching order.

They conceded Uncle Joe Sam to be a master-hand at tolling turkeys into range with a wing-bone yelper; for the safe of the argument they admitted that he seemed to understand the ways of fox-squirrels better than the fox-squirrels themselves did. But granted that much, still they desired—as one inspired spokesman put it—to know this: What excuse could an old, ignorant, red-necked, hard-shelled, wool-hatted tarrypin of a hillbilly such as he was, that hadn't never been nowheres and hadn't never seen nothing, have to go pesticating around a-claiming to be one of these here regular detecatives?

That was what these genial loafers desired to hear and asked for and loudly clamored for, with frequent interpolations of barbed elemental wit by this homespun jester and that. As the startling interruption came, their indignant prey stoutly was defending his authority as derived by mail and for a price from the

Argus International Detective Agency & Correspondence School at Portland, Maine, U. S. A., and likewise his potential merits for the proposed career of his declining but maturer years.

Conceded that he couldn't read very much, if at all, his daughter could; and she had read to him what the printed instructions sent through the post-office said about unearthing crimes and catching criminals; and he had remembered a good part of it; maybe half, possibly two-thirds. Moreover, if a man devoted his lifetime to studying the secret habits of the wild things, it was only common sense to assume that he'd be able to figure out the hidden motives and the hidden doings of human creatures better than the run of people, now wasn't it? Or, anyway, words to that effect.

Flurried but positive, he was diving head first into a counter-tide of derisive laughter when just then there appeared this man, Herbert Gaul, all soaked and agitated, crying out of his friend's death and begging for help.

At that they all sobered down and jumped up from where they had been lounging at the front of the store and hurried back with the stranger over the Crooketty Creek road. Uncle Joe Sam went too, but at a slower gait than the rest, he having rheumatic swellings in his elderly legs. He carried along his old double-barreled scatter-gun. As a confirmed hunter he carried it about with him nearly everywhere. Now, though, he seemed to regard it as an added credential, a token, so to speak, signifying an armed and militant vigilance against lawbreaking.

He hobbled along the best he could, but by the time he got down to the fog-covered lake which lay in the

lowland paralleling the river, plans for dragging already were under way. There was need for haste. According to the survivor, the accident had occurred less than half an hour earlier, and several there professed to know of cases when the breath was pumped back into lungs which had been under water longer even than half an hour.

Immediately, with a sort of improvised dredge, they scraped and raked over a roughly designated area, but brought up only mud and weedy stuff and dead branches of trees. Eventually the quest would take on a systematized aspect, with orderly direction to it, with groups working under the loose command of Wallie Starbuck, the storekeeper. That though was to follow after they had given up hope of saving a life and were moved by the size of the reward which Gaul offered for the recovery of the body.

Now, at this present confused and exciting stage, nearly every fellow offered suggestions which conflicted with nearly every other fellow's suggestions, and nobody was heeding any of them. In forty minutes enough advice to raise a sunken battleship went absolutely to waste. Starbuck did show some qualifications for leadership. He sent a messenger back to his place for dynamite and adequate coils of rope—thus far they had been using a skiff's painter—and to the blacksmith's on beyond his place for bent iron to make proper grapnels of. He called for volunteers who would strip off and risk pneumonia by diving for the dead man.

While awaiting the runner's return, Gaul repeated for Uncle Joe Sam's benefit his account of the drowning. Coming down he already had told and retold it.

But the oldest man of the lot then had been trailing far behind. Also, being spavined and slow-motioned, he had the wisdom to stay outside the orbits of active co-operations on the part of the crowd. At the first opportunity he engaged Gaul, saying he desired to learn the details if it wasn't too much trouble, and Gaul, who had grown measurably calmer, very willingly obliged him.

"There's not very much to it, awful as it is," began Gaul, speaking in that curious foreign way of his. He was from up North somewhere, as Uncle Joe Sam had heard, but even if he hadn't heard could have guessed from the other's manner of accenting and pronouncing his words. "We were over in that blind there on the far side. Two ducks came out of the fog and flew in toward us over the decoys—the second batch we'd seen this morning. I shot twice and missed both times —I'm not much of a shot. Mr. Pettigrew dropped his, though, with his second barrel. Considering that he was sixty-five years old and wore glasses he was pretty good at that sort of thing—not an expert gunner but fair."

"Yep, I heared the shootin' back up on the bluff whar me and the other boys wuz," stated Uncle Joe Sam. "You-all shot about a half-hour or so before that, though—three barrels that time, fust one, and then in a second or so two more, sort of clos't togither."

"Yes, we didn't get anything then—the fog was too thick to make them out," explained Gaul. "Well, as I was saying, Mr. Pettigrew knocked one bird down. I think that must be it floating off there."

His audience of one peered where he pointed to a seemingly far-away dot on the surface. Distant objects

were revealing themselves now as the fog shredded away. It had been very heavy; now it was disappearing fast.

"That's it," pronounced Uncle Joe Sam after prolonged scrutiny; "looks small. Must be a green-wing or mebbe one of these here summer ducks—whut up in your country they'd likely call wood-ducks. It's drifted out a right smart piece frum whar it spilled, ain't it?"

"It started drifting as soon as it struck. Besides, it wasn't quite dead then. It fluttered and splashed, sort of kicked itself along; and after it died and quit kicking, the wind carried it still farther away. Well, anyway, we crawled into that cranky little skiff that we'd borrowed, to go out and pick it up. I was handling the oars. Mr. Pettigrew was in the stern. I maneuvered to get up alongside the dead duck. It was about out there." Again he aimed an index-finger. "Yes, as nearly as I can tell, it was just about there that we caught up with it. I let the skiff come around broadside and tried to scoop it in with one of the oars. But I missed. So I said to Mr. Pettigrew that he'd better grab it as it went by.

"He leaned over to the left—like this—trying to reach it. He must've leaned too far, or it's possible that just at that second he had one of his attacks of dizziness. He was subject to them—something like vertigo, I guess it was—if he overexerted himself or even if he stooped his head. At any rate, it tipped suddenly, the skiff, I mean, and began to dip water—a lot of water—over the gunwale. And before I could think to throw my body in the other direction, I was in the lake and so was he, and the skiff was bottomside up.

"I went clear under, and went down deep, too, being weighed down with these heavy hunting-clothes and this pair of rubber hip-boots. He was dressed the same way. When I came up he was gone—not a sign of him. I swam around a little while—not very long though—hoping his head would show. I didn't dare try to dive for him, outfitted the way I was—I'm just a fair swimmer and I felt like I had tons hanging to me. So when his head still didn't show I got hold of the capsized skiff and steered her across to this bank and ran up to the store for help.

"There're two fine guns lost but I'm not thinking of them, of course. I'm thinking of the terrible finish of his trip and the fact that I've lost the best friend I ever had in this world, or ever expect to have. I've been his private secretary for twelve years, ever since I came out of college, and he was almost like a father to me. He didn't have any sons of his own or daughters either —only two nieces and one nephew and a few distant relatives."

"Pity you had to turn over out whar it's the deepest," commented Uncle Joe Sam, his face and voice gravely sympathetic. "Effen it'd 'a' happened ten rods clos'ter to the bank you could 'a' teched, standin' on your tiptoes."

"It must have been fate. Well, all I can hope for now is that they'll find the—the remains. And that's poor consolation to me. You think they'll find him, don't you?"

"Well, they oughter. Ef them hooks don't ketch onto his clothes a blast of dynamite mout fetch him up—it gin'elly does. And ef that should fail he oughter rise by hisself inside of three or four days

even with the lake water ez coolish ez 'tis now—the gases, you know—they'll lift him. That is, without he gits lodged fast amongst some brush or wedged-in-like under a sunken log down in a deep part. I've knowed of sech things."

"I'm afraid of that myself," admitted Gaul. "I've got a sort of feeling about it."

He stole a covert quick glance at his present companion. The old man's face was seamed with lines of gravity; his faded-out eyes were pondering on the squads of searchers where in front yonder they circled in two boats—a tricky dugout and a small skiff which had been found upturned and oarless in a shallow near at hand. The oars had been picked up some distance away toward mid-lake. Absently Uncle Joe Sam lifted a flap of his unbuttoned vest and breathed upon the preposterous lettered disk of imitation silver which he wore pinned over his left breast, and next he polished at it with the sleeve of his coat. He uttered a series of small clucks betokening regret and commiseration.

The man Gaul gave an inward heave of deep self-satisfaction. Hoodwinking this hobbling ancient was going to be no harder than it had been to befool those other deluded natives. Going to be? That was wrong. It already was. A pack of innocents, that was what these yokels here in the bottoms of this Tennessee River were. Who was it said that murder must always out—that a murderer, no matter how shrewd his design or how finished his execution of it, always left some betraying clue behind? Whoever it was, he was wrong. Behold, here was one murder about which there had been no slip-up—or only one and it didn't count—no mischance, no thing undone, no thing overdone. It had

been snugly, surely accomplished, and swiftly and accurately and completely.

This was what Herbert Gaul exultantly was saying to himself as now he sat him down on a log and drew off his sloshing boots. He did not feel as though he had just got through with committing premeditated murder. He felt like a man who has been bidden to a noble feast. A glow of pleasure for a perfect and balanced achievement flowed up out of him and spread through him and filled him, brain and heart and body. It was as though an artist sat by and admired his own masterpiece.

At a certain stage of the undertaking he had been physically very sick; at another had been seized with quick, almost panicky misgivings as to the success of its outcome. And before that when he first was putting his hand to it a mounting swell of doubt, call it irresolution, had for a moment, but only a moment, threatened his forces of decision.

That, though, was all past and over and done with; that was all safely behind him. Within himself he tested his nerves. Taut but not too taut, they responded like violin strings that strum their answer to the finger of a musican. A great confidence, a great strength and steadiness possessed him. Also, and on fuller thought of the transaction, there was with this a fine proud sensation, a sense of self-appreciation for having so readily and so powerfully mastered two separate and difficult contingencies—really they had been unforeseen emergencies—which had arisen in the midst of his job. Why, he had been a regular calculating machine, clever at the preliminary forecasts, prompt to take up the slack ends of things!

All he had to do now was just stand fast and let the events, as he had provided both for and against them, take their natural courses, he meanwhile to counterfeit just the properest, most plausible air of a man stricken with a great grief yet not stricken beyond powers of manly self-control and not shaken past the ability to meet a lamentable, tragical situation and still carry on. Like a chemist mixing a delicate compound in the peace of a quiet laboratory, he decided what looks to wear, what phrases to repeat, what emotional proportions to emphasize and what ones to slight.

CHAPTER XVIII—*Murder as a Fine Art*

THE inception of the plot dated back; had been months in the shaping and at first had worn a different face. To begin with, he uttered a false will for his patron, the man he today had killed. That was the germ idea. There was a true will accessible to him, in his keeping practically, but he had too much craft to destroy it. He had no fear of what might result from a comparison of signatures—he had worked too long to achieve a perfect imitation of Pettigrew's handwriting.

Likewise he had a better reason, which was this: By the real will nothing at all was given to most of Pettigrew's kinspeople; ten thousand cash was given to the two nephews and the niece; fifteen thousand went to him, Gaul, in consideration of long and faithful service, and all the residue, amounting roughly to three millions, was to create a fund in perpetuity for the education of colored youth in the South. Now, then, the newer will which he had forged left to both nephews and to the niece five hundred thousand dollars apiece; it left to him, Gaul, an equal amount; it reduced no lesser bequest but substantially increased most of them, and it devised the remainder, as shrunken to a few hundreds of thousands, to the cause of the young negroes.

So doing, Gaul was manufacturing sympathy and influence and friendly aid for himself; he was destroying the prospect of jealousy against him. Regardless of

whatever private suspicions anyone among them might entertain, it would be to the interests of every individual beneficiary to contend for the probating of the bogus will and the throwing out of the prior-dated genuine will. Human nature, selfishness, greed—why, they'd all fight as strong and influential allies on his side. So much for step number one.

Originally he had not contemplated doing away with his benefactor by violence. If the tempting thought came he put it from him as being unnecessary and over-risky. Pettigrew was well along in years, was sickly, and despite his small meager body, showed apoplectic tendencies. He had weak kidneys, too, or thought he had, which amounted practically to the same thing; was altogether a peevish, failing, dyspeptic bundle of walking symptoms, forever coddling himself and forever dosing himself. Surely Gaul should not have to wait long for his reward.

But perversely the hypochondriac hung on. He gave up active business; he gave himself over to playing seemingly conflicting parts—the part of a semi-invalid, and the part of a persistent gunner of wild fowl, which last was a sport of his youth, a thing dropped for business and now taken up again with almost a passionate avidity. The change benefited him. He felt better; at times he even went so far as to admit it might be barely possible that his health was improving.

This naturally wore heavily on Gaul. It irked him, all this going about to boggy, cheerless, isolated wild places, the lying out in all weathers; the uncongenial and uncomfortable surroundings; the banging away at shy but stupid web-footed birds; the enforced constant society of an irritable, peppery, intolerant master—for

Pettigrew, who had few friends and no intimates, would have Gaul and none other for a companion on his gunning expeditions.

Gaul's patience wore out. He thought of poison—some slowly consuming drug to be slipped into the medicines Pettigrew forever was taking. But poisoning was such a dangerous business; doctors at autopsies had a nasty way of finding out things. He discarded that half-formed plan. He builded a better one and he stayed his eager hand only until time and place and conditions should match favorably with the purpose.

Largely through chance the opportunity came. Earlier in this present month of October Pettigrew took him to Reelfoot Lake for the beginning of the open season on migratory game. But the weather still was mild—Pettigrew called it, in the argot of the hunter, "bluebird weather." It was too mild to stir the flocks out of the marshes of the northern resting-grounds. This was disappointing, because Pettigrew had meant by stages to follow the birds down the Mississippi to southern Louisiana.

At this juncture there happened along a fellow sportsman from somewhere in northern Alabama—a gentleman named Scopes—who told Mr. Pettigrew of a small unfrequented lake situate not very far above what he called the Big Bend of the Tennessee River, where for unfathomed reasons and despite climatic conditions there was a fairly dependable early flight of black duck and teal. Later would come swarms of the greenheads and the pintails, from which latter creatures this lake took its name. Within moderation, he felt he could guarantee Mr. Pettigrew, going thither, would find satisfactory sport for a week or so anyhow.

He went further, this friendly Mr. Scopes. Perhaps he wanted to prove that Southern hospitality was no myth; or perhaps the free-masonry which prevails among chronic duck-hunters moved him. The town where he lived was not very many miles away from this lake. He paid a nominal sum yearly for the exclusive shooting privileges here. He had boats at hand and a blind, and a supply of wooden stools for enticing the birds. There was a farmhouse within a half-hour's walk of the place where two or three guests might be accommodated with food and lodging. He offered to transfer his rights to Mr. Pettigrew and Mr. Gaul, to lend his equipment and to write a letter arranging with the widow who owned the farmhouse for their entertainment. He knew a neighbor who would be willing to act as their guide.

Mr. Pettigrew declined the last suggestion—he didn't like strange guides, he explained; was trying to train Gaul as a guide—but he accepted the rest of it with thanks. So the upshot was that the two of them packed up and traveled by train to Paducah and there boarded a stern-wheel packet, the Lady Slidell, a somewhat smaller craft than the passenger steamers they were accustomed to seeing on the upper Ohio, but a very comfortable one, as they immediately discovered.

The Lady Slidell on the day before had delivered them at a small landing, and a native with a buckboard had carried them and their belongings to the homestead of the accommodating widow near a crossroads known as Starbuck's Store. In the afternoon they tramped through thick woods, that were aflame with autumnal colors, to the lake for a preliminary survey.

It revealed itself as a longish narrow body, encom-

passed with tall timber, and around its edges with dense undergrowth, in which there was but one tiny break, and that where the footpath broke through. In times of high water it was joined, top and foot, to the river —not exactly a phenomenon in these parts, as they had learned. Very probably it once upon a prehistoric time had been a part of the bed of the river. But now the connecting sloughs were diminished to boggy swales, gone almost dry in spots, and the lake temporarily was securely landlocked.

To Gaul's eyes it was a forbidding and altogether desolate spot, but Pettigrew liked the deserted looks of it. Its isolation should suit the wild fowl. Therefore it suited him.

It had at least one distinction not common to such waters but common enough to tidal estuaries. Offshore above the solitary blind and therefore nearer the head, there stood a fish-weir made according to a familiar pattern, of tall poles set very closely together with one long slightly curved arm extending out across the current and the other bending in and forming an enclosed pouch, the whole being, roughly, in the shape of the Arabic numeral 9, with the joint not quite closed where the loop met the backbone.

Scopes had told them of the existence of this trapping device. A former owner of the place had built it, using the peeled trunks of straight willow saplings cut out of the adjacent swamps, his hope being that, in the time of the spring freshets, quantities of marketable large fish, schooling in from the river, would be pocketed here and held prisoners until he seined them out. The venture, though, had never paid and had been abandoned, but the ragged ramparts still stood.

Against their outer flanks driftwood had been deposited by succeeding overflows, just as dead leaves will rank in the lee of a pasture wall, until the accumulated mass formed rude rafts and platforms. The serried tips, standing yards above the present stage of water, were favorite perching places for fish-eating birds. Here they would sit, like sparrows on fence-pickets, to watch with cocked heads, and then to dart down and catch the impounded small fry.

On this afternoon nearly every slender pile had its feathered tenant. There were chuckling kingfishers not yet driven down-country by the withheld threat of winter; there were silent herons, both great and small; there were a few pouncing herring-gulls, they being the advance-guards for the hosts which soon would swarm in from the regions of the Great Lakes; there were two dingy water-turkeys, rare visitors these, from the semi-tropical bayous far south of here; there was an even rarer casual out of the same quarter—a lone brown pelican strayed far inland from his accustomed habitat in the brackish bays or the bitter salt of the gulf. There was a pair of fish-hawks cruising overhead, and there was a solitary largish black forager flapping about, a creature of a species which Gaul could not identify. He was no ornithologist.

Money was what he loved, not nature; and especially he did not love such phases of nature as now presented themselves to his view. But in one regard he was pleased. For he saw that his chance was at hand. This lonesome, unvisited place was as though made to order for his well-nursed and long-delayed design. Inside him his determination twisted and tightened like a screw being turned on its threads.

And when this morning he had awakened to find everything wrapped in thick woolly fogginess, a vapory blanket against sight and a muffler for sound, he rejoiced inwardly. They had been called at four-thirty o'clock; had breakfasted in a lamp-lit kitchen with their sleepy hostess serving them, and long before the retarded daylight came, had trudged through the cloaking grayness across a field and had entered a narrow trail where wet cold bushes whipped at their legs. He bore his gun, also a heavy case of shells, a luncheon and a jug of water for drinking. Old Pettigrew went ahead of him, carrying only a gun, and thereby the more surely sealed his own death warrant. His bottled hate made the laden and laboring Gaul fairly writhe as he followed close behind his victim. He felt as venomous as a summer rattler. He was.

Coming down to the lake's margin they had to feel their way. The hidden miracle of the dawn was past; behind them the sun must have risen, but to prove it there was only a palish opalescent glowing through the darkness. Ten yards away all objects remained invisible. It was by stumbling against it that Pettigrew, still in advance, found the skiff snubbed up to the bank.

The older man climbed in and went astern. The younger cast off the tether, took the oars and pulled out, aiming as best he could for a point diagonally opposite, where the well-sheltered blind should be. Largely by luck, they blundered headlong into it and disembarked and made ready against the further lifting of the fog and the coming of the game. Gaul set out the decoys; that regularly was his task and regularly Pettigrew scolded him for his awkwardness at it.

The fog lifted or at any rate it thinned. But it was

after eight o'clock before in the murk about them they caught the *swish-swish,* like tough silk being torn crosswise, of swift wings. Directly overhead, and by reason of an optical illusion due to the atmospheric conditions, seeming to be twice their proper size, suddenly appeared a brace of ducks. They loomed an instant, swung, disappeared, then wheeled back into sight, poised and hovered, their pinions set and they ready to pitch in.

Pettigrew fired his right barrel, and the second bird crumpled and tumbled down with a splash perhaps ten yards in front of their ambush. He laid his empty gun aside, wriggled out from behind the blind and splashed through the shallows.

"Well, anyhow, I got one," he said. "Why didn't you shoot?"

These were his last words. He stooped to pick up the dead bird, and with that Gaul after just one lightning-swift fit of hesitation, one instantaneous flicker of his will, let him have it in the back of the head and dropped him.

But strangely he lived. He must have a skull like iron. Face downward in the water, he wallowed and kicked spasmodically—like a speared frog, like a hooked fish. His shoulders heaved, he thrust up his mangled head and started a strangled gurgling cry. He began it but he never finished it. Gaul broke through the blind, advanced, stood directly behind him and with the muzzle almost touching, gave him the contents of the tight-choked left-hand barrel—wadding, burnt powder, a load of chilled number sixes—right between the shoulders. So of course after that he did not stir again.

Right there Gaul had displayed that first flash of

quick-wittedness upon which, looking back on it, he might congratulate himself. How expedient he had been about reshaping the plan—how marvelously swift! For beforehand it had been his intention to claim he had killed by accident. The remorseful grief-stricken explanation of it already had been framed and mentally many times rehearsed—the fatal and ever-to-be-regretted moment of carelessness, the stumbling of an unwary foot, the involuntary tightening of a numbed trigger-finger on a touchy trigger. Every day nearly, in the hunting season, you read just that self-same story in the city papers. Some days you read it twice or oftener even.

But here was a difficulty: To account for one mortal wound in the dead body would be easy enough; to account for two such wounds and both of them inflicted from the rear, would be impossible. Instantly though, or so now it in retrospect seemed to him, this most resourceful of assassins remolded his scheme. He would weight the body with the heavy shell-box and sink it in a deep part of the lake. In places the lake was very deep. This fact he knew by hearsay; he would prove it by making soundings. Then he would hurry back to the crossroads with a tale of a boat overturned, of the drowning of his unfortunate benefactor, of his own narrow escape. Why, indeed, this should make infinitely a better tale than the other would have been.

He drew the skiff from its hiding in the slushy reed-grown herbage alongside the blind and shoved it out to where the flattened corpse was sprawled in shallows now vividly distempered. Taking care to get little or no blood on his garments, he lifted the body into the stern of the skiff. It seemed very small, very shrunken,

more meager even than in life. He had no trouble in huddling it on the floor-boards below the level of the gunwales.

He put in also the shell-case and the two guns, got in himself and took the oars and pulled out through the cloaking fog, which opaquely exaggerated everything—distances, the sizes of objects, the shapes of them. He meant to use the hitch rope of the skiff for fastening the shell-case to Pettigrew's middle. That was a risk, to be sure—the disappearance of the rope might possibly create suspicion. But the contingency was remote and in any event it was a risk which must be taken.

He pulled with steady strokes. He must have been in the middle of the lake or near it, when misgivings of a new and a terrible sort beset him. Suppose, dragging for the corpse, they grappled it fast and hauled up the dumb yet eloquent evidence to hang him? Suppose it somehow was freed from its anchorage and rose? Suppose there was a way of draining this lake? One overlapping another, these dreadful contingencies raced across his mind and the blood flowing to his heart seemed suddenly to stop short and curdle.

He threw up his head as though to clear his brain of fumes and by that motion found the answer for his problems, for in that same instant he remembered having read somewhere, years and years before—perhaps it was in Dickens he read it—how formerly in England a suicide was buried where two highways met, with a stake driven through the heart.

Not a hundred yards from him and, by reason of a providential rift in the fog, more or less distinctly visible, a whole army of stakes showed themselves; a geometric pattern of them, protruding at gentle slants

above the misted surface of the waters. They angled outward and toward him forming a sort of irregular, slightly tilted palisade. A considerable number of them, especially those which formed the wing of the ruined weir, were shifted from true alignment with their fellows. Indeed a few had vanished altogether, leaving spaces like gaps in a row of snaggly teeth. Possibly they had worked free at their bases; or then again it might be that heavy floating logs came banging along in flood time and knocked these down. If some were gone altogether it stood to reason that some of the others must be loosely rooted in the loamy bottom.

He pulled across there, frightening away a mixed flock of the birds which, as he had casually remarked yesterday, made this their hunting-ground. Steering alongside he tried certain experiments. They were most gratifying experiments. The interwoven drift-jam contained sizable sawlogs, strayed cross-ties, trunks of fallen trees. At this point and again at that it snugly was fixed. It teetered and quivered under pressure but would sustain him, would give him a reasonably secure footing. He tested it and knew it would.

Climbing out on it and balancing himself cautiously, he found that by exercising due care he could walk to and fro along it. He did this, meanwhile holding the painter of the burdened skiff securely, and at once dislodged from a crevice that special accessory to his new design for which he sought—a length of tree bough, water-soaked, solid enough to withstand hard strokes, heavy enough to serve him either as battering-ram or hammer. And also by feeling, he discovered, just where accident or age had made those intermittent

spaces between the stakes, one stake which could be lifted out of its present position.

He did lift it out in a series of tugs, after having forcibly freed it from its socketing in the tenacious mud of the lake bed. Heaving it up, foot by foot, he saw that at its base it was sharpened to a point, as he had expected it would be. It had been displaced; it could readily be replaced and with blows upon its top given a firmer position than before and no human eye, however keen, be ever the wiser. Finally, for the simplification of his task there was this to be said—the body he meant to pin and shove under and press flat at the foot of his stake already was bored through and through.

It was here that for a brief ghastly spell a surge of nausea made him weak and dizzy. It passed though, immediately, and did not return. At the end of twenty minutes or so, the main job being completed, he reentered the rowboat and drawing away a few yards contemplated his handiwork for any betraying flaws. There was no flaw. There was not the slightest difference by which to distinguish that one particular pile from the piles which neighbored it right and left. What hideous transfixed secret it held so securely submerged ten, twelve feet down beneath the placid coffee-colored waters would still be his secret and his alone long after the tissues dissolved and the skeleton parted and the bones sank into the soft ooze. Now let them drag and probe and scrape to their deluded hearts' content.

He rowed back to mid-lake, diagonally fronting the blind, and thereabouts, with an oar plunged straight downwards so that his arm was wetted to the shoulder, he made soundings until the paddle blade no longer

touched bottom. By taking bearings from the shore, now more plainly seen as a rising breeze carded the mist, he marked this spot. He meant to return to it. He did return after he had rowed into a small eddy above the blind and, standing knee-deep in water, had tilted the skiff on its side and painstakingly had washed it clean of all its fresh red stains. He even washed out the thole-pins of the oar-locks and splashed water into certain seams and cracks in the planking. Next he made sure that the lazy wave-movement formed by the breeze had carried away the discolorations.

Then, once more taking along his gun and Pettigrew's and the shells, he went back where he had sounded the depths and cast these articles overboard. But before that, standing in the blind, he had reloaded both guns and for support of his revised narrative had fired either set of barrels in rapid succession into the air.

He sent one oar adrift here. With the other he sculled his way nearer the bank and climbed overboard in water which was thigh-deep on him. He set the remaining oar free, capsized the skiff and gave it a strong push outward, then held his breath and stopped under, submerging himself entirely. His cap he allowed to lift off his head so that his scalp got thoroughly wet along with the rest of him. He waded ashore, being careful to emerge at a point where he stepped upon springy vegetation which recorded no foot-traces, and ran, bareheaded, to give the alarm.

And now here he was, pouring the water out of his boots, and the thing was finished and it all so foolproof and so perfect!

CHAPTER XIX—*The Crippled Undertaker*

THREE days went by, then four, then five, and little happened except that Gaul sent messengers across country to the nearest railroad point with telegrams for divers of the dead man's kin and for the executors of the estate. Answers came back and were relayed to him, but none of the senders appeared. They would leave in Gaul's competent hands the melancholy efforts to reclaim the remains of deceased; the wires so stated. This suited Gaul.

He spent the daylight of these five days at Pintail. To the searchers he made it appear that merely a natural anxiety over their failure to recover his friend's body concerned him. He watched while they set off their futile, foolish blasts of dynamite, and inwardly laughed at them behind the mask of a face set to show a deep concern. The explosions created a heavy mortality among the fishes, but that was all. A grapnel brought up one of the guns, but the other gun and the shell-case remained unfound.

Also Gaul watched Uncle Joe Sam Flint. That venerable person took no active part in these vain proceedings but appeared content to moon about the shores of the lake, a solitary comic figure, always with his gun on his shoulder or in the crook of his elbow.

Once, on an afternoon toward the end of the week, Gaul suffered a passing qualm of apprehensiveness

when he beheld the old man on the low bank immediately overlooking the abandoned fish-trap. At once, though, he was able to convince himself that he had no cause for trepidation because about all Flint did—and he did it for at least two hours—was to sit near the water's edge and smoke a pipe and contemplate his surroundings.

He did do just one thing besides these things, and that, to Gaul's way of thinking, was a characteristically stupid thing. He pulled up and fired toward the flocks hovering and darting among the pilings. He didn't hit anything, though. At the shot the frightened birds sped away but presently returned to their foraging, and shortly after this their disturber betook himself off.

This triviality befell on the afternoon of the fifth day. On the morning of the sixth day, it being a Saturday, only four volunteer searchers appeared. Before that there had been any number of them up to fifteen or eighteen, not including women and children for onlookers. But apparently some who at the outset had worked the hardest to win the reward were losing hope. So only these four came and they knocked off at noon and went to their homes to eat their dinners. Gaul himself was preparing to go to his boarding-place at the widow's when Uncle Joe Sam came trudging up and hailed him.

"Mister," he said, in his friendly nasal drawl, "I wonder would you mind much agoin' out thar jest onc't more with me and show me perzactly whar it were you turned over and all. I'll pull the boat. You see, I've got a kind of a new idee about this here."

Gaul didn't mind. So they boarded the skiff, he sitting in the stern facing the oarsman, and they cruised

over a given radius and patiently Gaul, perhaps for the fiftieth time that week, repeated his mythical narrative, and old Flint peered into the saffron waters intently and nodded understandingly as each point was told.

"I reckin that'll be enough," he said presently, "and much oblige' to you, mister." He gave a hard tug on the oars, then another and a third.

"Hold on," said Gaul, glancing backward over his shoulders. "You're getting off your course, aren't you? We're going away from bank, not for it."

"I aim to head this here way," explained Flint. "That there old fish-cage jest yonder—that's whar I'm headin' fur."

"But why?" Gaul strove to keep any suggestion of uneasiness out of his query.

"Oh, I got another little idee, tha's all. Look at them near'most stobs stickin' up thar. Count 'em, please, startin' frum this end till you come to the 'leventh."

"I see it—what of it?" Gaul's voice was steady, careless, but the beginnings of a terrible premonition smote on the killer's nerves.

"Well, I aim—ef you don't mind?—to land at that drift-pile and let you out. And then, ez a special favor to me—you bein' younger'n I am and lots pearter—I'm agoin' to ast you, please, suh, to take holts of that thar 'leventh stob and sort of wrastle it loose fur me."

Gaul tensed himself for a spring. It was too late for that. Uncle Joe Sam had released his grip on the oars; they trailed in the oar-locks. He had his gun up ready to snap its butt to his shoulder; its muzzle, slowly lifting, almost brushed Gaul's breast.

"Mebbe"—the old man's tone was gentleness itself

—"mebbe, mister, thar's some reason why you wouldn't keer to pull up that thar stob, heh? Well, then, which would you ruther do—have me hold this here fuzee on you and make you pull it up whether or no, or else whilst us two is settin' here with nobody else handy, would you ruther tell me whut's fastened down underneath at the foot of it?"

In the terror which had seized on him and was shaking him to pieces, Gaul misinterpreted the motive behind this last. Could it mean this grim old man wanted pay for silence? It must mean that. It had to mean that. He caught at the hope it seemed to offer.

"I—I'll tell you," he cried, "tell you everything!" He did tell, in halting broken sentences, and by the time he had finished telling, the skiff before a puffy wind had drifted ashore at a point not very far from where the footpath broke through the frost-painted woods.

"This'll do fust rate fur a landin'," stated Flint. "Fur the time bein' I reckin we'll jest let that thar stob be. I reckin that'll suit you best. We'll get out here—you fust, please, and stand stiddy, till I kin crawl out." He made no threats, no promises, no comments on what he had just heard, but his gun-barrel was eloquent.

Had he tried, Gaul couldn't have run though. His legs were like columns of soft gelatin under him, and in his ears like a clashing gong he heard doom ringing, and he had a hideous choked feeling as though a noose was about his throat. In a way of speaking, a noose was.

Obeying a command—but it was in the form of a request most mildly and politely put—he laid his hands behind his back and crossed them and Uncle Joe Sam lashed them together with the tie-rope of the skiff. So

doing, his captor apologized for the lack of proper bonds:

"I ordered me a set of handcuffs the same time I got me my badge and all. Cost eight dollars, too. The badge come and the diplomy, but they ain't never sent them handcuffs yit. I'm sorry."

He scooped a palmful of lake water and let it trickle on the knot to shrink it tighter. He wrapped the free end of the rope about his left wrist, leaving perhaps three yards of tether between him and his prisoner.

"Them boys up at the store—they certainly have been thinkin' they had the laugh on me." The old man chuckled softly. "They'll be laughin' t'other sides of their mouths! . . . Not that way, please, mister," he said then. They had come to where the trail forked under the low bluff a hundred feet or so back from the lake. "We take the right-hand turn. You see," he added painstakingly, as though feeling an explanation were due, "you see, I wouldn't dast take you out past Starbuck's. Them boys mout not feel prone to string you up jest fur killin' your friend the way you done, you both bein' strangers, ez you mout say, but I'm afeard they mout git the notion of takin' you away frum me and stringin' you up fur the way you treated him after he wuz dead. That would rile 'em up—and then them workin' so long and so hard on your say-so fur nuthin'.

"So we'll jist dodge off here to the right and 'leven miles'll bring us to the county-seat. We got a nice new county jail. It's a right smart piece fur you to have to walk, but we'll jest jog along slow and take it easy." He chuckled again. "We'll have to, account of my old laigs."

But it was the old man and not the younger who shambled up the slope and on into the tall timber. Gaul's chin lolled on his breast and at intervals hard shivers ran through him—through his legs, his body, his twisted pinioned arms. Not once again during the long journey to the new county jail did he speak.

Flint did, though, several times. For example, he presently said: "Mister, mebbe you'd like to know how 'twuz I come to ketch on? Well, I'll tell you, then," he went on, answering his own question. "It wuzn't nothin' you said nor nothin' you done. You wuz purty smart, purty slick about it. I got to give you credit fur that. It wuz somethin' you didn't have no hand in, mister. It wuz a bird!

"Yes, suh, believe it or not, jest ez you're a mind to, that't whut it wuz—a bird. A crow, leastwise a kind of a crow. Not one of them reg'lar crows sich ez is so thick round these parts all the year round, but a bigger kind than whut they air and diffe'nt in his ways. F'rinstance, he ain't so sharp-set after cawn and hen-aigs ez they air. Seems like his taste runs more to spiled vittles—carrion and stuff like that, same ez a buzzard's does. I reckin he ain't no keener eye than a buzzard's fur somethin' that's dead, but his smellin' powers is whar he seems to have the aidge on all of 'em. And smart—gentlemen, hush! It's like ez ef he had second sight.

"He's an old residenter, same ez me. He's been hangin' round this lake fur years now—three or four anyways. He ain't got no mate and I reckin he'd 'a' pulled out long before this, only he's got somethin' chronic the matter with one wing and can't fly so very good—just sort of threshes along when he's in a big

hurry. It's a wonder to me how he come to git away in here in the fust place, because he don't rightly belong to a country like this.

"A feller that wuz in here gunnin' two seasons ago, he told me about him. This here feller I'm speakin' of knowed the book names fur birds and all, even ef he hadn't steddied 'em clos't the way I have, and he says to me that this here crow rightly belonged fur away frum here—by the oceanside. Sea-crow—that's whut he called him. He 'lowed he must 'a' strayed mighty fur frum headquarters. He marveled about it, he did so. . . . Jest a minute, mister, I want to kind of ketch up with my breathin'. Got a kind of stitch in my laig, too."

There was a very short halt, then they went on, the leash drooping and swaying between them, and he droned on:

"Yes, suh, it's likely I wouldn't never 'spicioned nothin' out of the way ef it hadn't been fur that selfsame old crow. We've got to thank him. At the fust, I jist hung round because it seemed like to me, me havin' tuck up detecatin', that it wuz my place to be on hand whilst this here drowndin' business wuz goin' on. That's the main reason I stayed round. But nachelly I kept my eyes peeled and day before yistiddy 'twuz, I tuck note of him—the way he wuz actin' and all. I reckin ef I'd seen him onc't before that I'd seen him a thousand times, but now he wuz actin' funny—fur him.

"Here's whut he wuz doin': He wuz settin' constant on one of them stobs on that old fish-trap along with the kingfishers and the creek cranes and all like that. I knowed whut they wuz thar fur—to ketch 'em some

live feed—but whut wuz he thar fur? That's whut floored me. Because he ain't no great hand fur minnows and sunfish. Ef he's goin' to eat fish he'd ruther it'd be washed up on the bank, good and dead.

"But thar he wuz, and somehow I couldn't keep frum watchin' him and I thinks to myself: 'Whut're you up to, anyway?' And after a spell I noticed yit another funny thing about him. I notice that he's stickin' to jest one stob all the time.

"The other birds is flappin' hither and yon, and lightin' fust one place and then another, but he ain't —no, suh. And by grannies, the next I sees is that he's peckin' away, peckin' away, with that old big black bill of his'n at the top of that stob like he's tryin' to git at somethin' down in it.

"All that night it stuck in my haid. I like to figger out whut wild things mean when they do a seemin'ly curious thing, because, shore ez shootin', they've always got a sensible meanin' to it. So yestiddy when I come back I looked fur him right off. And shore enough thar he sets on that same stob of his'n and he's peckin' away harder'n ever, seems like. So in the evenin' I tuck a turn round the end of the lake and crope up clos't and now I could hear him fussin' to himself —jist squakin' away between licks.

"I comes out in the open whar he kin see me and still he don't fly away—which ain't like him. So I sets and I steddies and I steddies and afterwhile I says to myself: 'That thar stob he's foolin' with wuz pethy to begin with, it bein' a willow, and its grain runs straight up and down. Mo'over, it's been asettin' thar in the water a long time so probably it's got deep seams in it and water-cracks. It don't stand to reason,' I says to

myself, 'that that thar old scound'el's tuck a sudden fancy fur willow chips.'

"And right then and thar the beginnin's of a big notion come to me. So I ups and shoots one barrel above him in the air but not clos't enough to hit him. Away he goes, lickety-split, but, by grannies, he don't go clean away, and that ain't like his nature, neither. He flops round and round and round and then purty soon back he comes, like he's cravin' and can't stay away and down he drops clos'ter and clos'ter—"

It was as though by his homely words this old man created a dreadful picture. It penetrated even through his sweated agony of despair to the numbed brain of the murderer, so that he saw it and the damnation that was in it—this winged and ravenous undertaker, this black dreadful bird of nemesis, cawing, circling, hovering, descending to worry and tear with a strong greedy beak at the porous tip of a willow stake—a certain stake, always one certain stake.

"Clos'ter and clos'ter he comes and lights ag'in and starts peckin' ag'in. . . . And so that's how-come me to toll you out thar on the lake with me this mawnin' and try that little trick of mine on you, which it certainly worked out right, didn't it, now? . . . Them blame' boys back at Starbuck's—say, mister, I kin shut my eyes and see the fool-looks on their faces!"

CHAPTER XX—*Introducing Mr. Red Ham Gravy Jones*

AS I recall, we had just come abreast of the Piney Bluff when my father's cousin began telling the story which, after all these years, I have decided to retell. This Piney Bluff was more merely than a bearing for navigators—a lifting of one shore into a shaly wall where the face of the rock was splotched and streaky with iron ore, like daubs of war-paint on a buck's cheeks. The green stuff on the crest helped the simile along; for it would make you think of a properly dressed scalp-lock, all stiff and bristled, with a comb of spiny long dark feathers rising above.

The Piney Bluff was the first place you would see, going up-stream, which meant down-country, that had native pine trees growing on it. Geographically, that spelled something. When you got that far you were about to pass out of the Border South into the South of the late Southern Confederacy.

Before this cousin of my father took up his tale there had been much talk of this and of that, part of which I have remembered—or, anyhow, have tried to. Very clearly I do remember how sweet the breeze was, and it singing to the tune of a soft blowy spring day; and how that stern-wheeler of the unusual name, the Promised Land, seemed to be gliding upon waters which showed an amberlike translucence over by the banks, but were blue as anything where they raced past under our flared gunwales.

And it seemed to me there was a kingfisher for each snag and a redbird for each thicket, else a joree or a mocker; and a nervous snipe-looking bird for each ell of bared sandbar. And a thick climbing vine in about every other tree and a fat cluster of mistletoe growing on about every other limb.

I was an eager half-grown boy; moreover, I was making the round trip as a guest of the owners—and unchaperoned. That, to me, was a main advantage. I had made trips before—many of them on many different boats—but never until now had I traveled without parental supervision. So this then was a great adventure and I was living every inch of it—living it and loving it.

I figure I was born with the love of that life in my blood. For three generations behind me my people had followed the river, or if not this river one closely adjacent to it. A pioneer of our line, beginning away back yonder in eighteen-hundred flat, had earned his bread as a keel-boater. He would build him a broadhorn and pile it with the products of his country—tobacco mostly, and sometimes the peltries of the fur-bearing things—and hire some of those half-hoss, half-alligator neighbors of his for a crew; and then, with poles and sweeps for steering gear and sometimes a sail up to catch a wind that favored, he would drift her down the Cumberland to the Ohio, a short stretch, and down the Ohio to the Mississippi, another short stretch, and down the Mississippi to New Orleans, which was a very long stretch indeed, through what had been Spanish but later had become French possessions. At New Orleans he would sell boat and cargo and either walk home or ride home on horseback by the old

Natchez Trace. He prospered thereby; so when steamboats came in, his son, who was my grandfather, owned steamboats; and now my father was a steamboatman, too, of sorts; and I also meant to grow up and be a steamboatman myself, although he appeared to have different ideas on that score.

Already I had explored every inch of the packet. I had talked with the black barber and with the black porter and with the pantry crew. Down in the engine-room I spent happy hours getting my best Sunday suit, which was naturally my traveling suit, all greased up, and asking questions and storing in my greedy brain a jargon of delightfully mysterious words relating to such mechanical essentials as "doctors" and "midship niggers" and "skip-up jacks" and "puttle-pins" and "mud-drums"; likewise, and among others, "poppets" and "kevils" and "chocks."

I had, for personal reasons, invoiced the freightage. I knew where there was furniture in crates and stick-candy in firkins and chewing-tobacco in wooden caddies and strong drink in jugs and demijohns. I knew where the nested washtubs were, where the coiled wire fencing, the plows, the boxed sets of harness, the cases of drygoods or boots and shoes or millinery. And by past experience I knew that, returning, we would be bringing argosies infinitely more fascinating even than these—bags of goobers, green hides in smelly bales, coops of chickens; cotton, either sacked for ginning or baled for export; hoop-poles, hogsheads of the heavy black weed from the Valley patches; mules, swine, eggs, butter, sorghum cane, cedar slabs, early vegetables—all the raw wealth of a generous isolated domain.

Now, by invitation from him, I was tagging Mr. Red

Ham Gravy Jones up to the pilot-house. The gentleman's name charmed me, his calling also. Subsequently I was to learn that he had been born a Jones and had been christened after two great Americans, to wit, Hamilton and Graves; then nature gave him a rick of fiery hair; hence, and almost inevitably, followed the enchanting title of his maturity. What chance really had he, in that environment, to escape it? Nor did I ever have reason to suspect that he ever tried to. On the contrary, he wore it with an obvious pride.

By profession—and this was what made his personality so very captivating to me—he was, as he put it, a dealer in extry-special truck; which was to say he cruised the river back and forth, bartering at this wooded landing and that for certain fascinating by-products—for almost anything and almost everything that might be marketable outside and beyond ordinary trade channels.

He trafficked in ginseng—only he called it "sang" and in private spoke contemptuously of those who delved for it as "sang diggers"—and ginseng was the root which bore so curious a resemblance to a little splayed human figure with spraddling limbs, and because of the symbolic shape of it was most highly valued by the Chinese, who made it into medicines. He dealt in other roots—sassafras, which was for tea to thin the blood in the springtime; snakeroot, which was mottled; puccoon, whose bloody juices once had dyed the naked skins of Chickasaws and Creeks ranging these same river brakes; May-apple root; roots whose names I have forgotten.

He dealt in minkskins, in coonskins, in muskrat skins, occasionally in otterskins. He bought the native

nuts from the gatherers—chinquapins, pecans, hazelnuts, walnuts, scaly-barks; in their seasons he bought ripe pawpaws and wild grapes and strings of freshly killed squirrels. He bought dried apples and clandestine peach brandy, trapped game and live possums, dried herbs and barks, wild honey and gay rag quilts.

Finders would bring him weapons and implements from the Indian mounds—he gave me a broad flint disk, I remember—or rusty Minié balls and corroded scraps of soldier equipment from around Fort Henry and Shiloh. These oddities he would take if the prices were right. Had he dreamed that elsewhere in the wide world there would some day develop a mad demand for such things, he might also have had his pick of discarded spinning-wheels and home-made cradles.

To me, there was a high and abiding romance about Mr. Red Ham Gravy Jones's merchandising. It called up thoughts of shy, secret treasures in imagined dim recesses; it called up pictures of stripped warriors stealing through the deep timber; pictures of men in blue at deadly grips with men in gray or butternut brown. I take it you would have felt much the same way about it. But he seemed to regard his as a commonplace and utterly prosaic career, although abounding, as he frequently deplored, in pitfalls and chances for unwise speculation.

If you really wished to see this voyager excited, show him a bargain in coon-pelts, say. Otherwise he remained a ruminative, carrot-colored person, with the slitted eye of a born huckster gleaming shrewdly from under a tufted pinkish brow.

Very willingly, when he asked me, I trailed him to the pilot-house. Aloft there we found a small but

select coterie bearing the steersman company through an idle hour or so. Cap'n Tip January, the Prayin' Mate, who being part-owner nevertheless preferred to fill a subordinate berth on this boat although he might as well have captained her, holding as he did a master's certificate—he was present, and likewise the engineer off watch, Mr. Giles Westerman, and this cousin I have mentioned, who was a leaf-buyer for one of the foreign governments—Italy, I think.

I perched myself on the high bench at the back with my legs tucked in out of target-range of anyone spurting his jet of tobacco juice at the open door of the empty stove, and set my twitching young ears to listen.

Right away an elderly passenger in the blue coat and the black hat with its gold cord of a familiar type stumped across the hurricane roof below us; and Mr. Polk, the pilot, grinned at him and then over his shoulder grinned collectively at us, and said to Mr. Jones, throwing in a comprehensive wink: "Sold that old G. A. R. boy yonder a piece of U. S. Grant's bedstead yet, Red Ham?"

The rest laughed at that and for my benefit Mr. Polk explained his joke:

"Know how this peckerwood-headed gentleman got his start, son? Well, I'll tell you. He got it selling Northern veterans, on their way up to visit the battlefield, little bitsy pieces of the walnut bed that General Grant slept in at Savannah the night before Shiloh. Now, understand, I'm not questioning his honesty but I will just say to you that that old bed must have been two hundred feet long and sixty feet wide—considerably larger over all than this steamboat—and to build it they had to cut down ten acres of prime black-

walnut trees, and twenty cabinet-makers had to work three weeks to—"

"Son," exclaimed Mr. Jones, "you pay any attention to these here scoundrels, you'll never git nowheres in this world. They'll ruin your character shore. It's hard work, me rustlin' fur corn bread and fat meat enough to keep goin' without bein' libeled to death by ever' low-down liar of a pilot that comes along."

"You say that," retorted Mr. Polk, "you with money tucked away in three different banks!"

"That's jest another of those infunnel fairy-tales that you're always tellin' on me before strangers."

"Matter of fact, Red, this old Tennessee River's been purty good to you, honest, ain't she now?" said Cap'n January.

"Well, I ain't frettin'," allowed Mr. Jones. "Ef the born liars would leave me be, I'd manage to skimp along and mebbe be able to stay out of the poorhouse in my old age. Whut gravels me of'entimes though is the gosh-awful waste there is goin' on—the mess that thrives in the water and along these shores that ain't none of it no earthly use to nobody nor never will be, neither. I study a lot about that." Mr. Jones spoke with the materialistic candor of a practical man.

"F'rinstance, look at the amount of these here big slickery black mussels there is cumberin' the bottoms of this river and mighty nigh chokin' her off up yonder two-hund'ed-odd miles above here, at the Shoals. Jest billions and trillions of 'em and not fitten fur nothin' except mebbe to feed hawgs on, purvidin' there wuz any way to dredge 'em out, which there ain't.

"And take all these here big shovelnose catfish that come along certain times of year, eatin' up the food

that other fishes that're wuth somethin' might be gittin', and them not fitten fur nothin' exceptin' the fun of giggin' 'em by torchlight at nights out of a dugout or a skiff. Now, you take and cut a steak out of a blue-cat weighin' about twelve pound and roll it in cornmeal and fry it in hot skillet-grease—and, man, you've got somethin' to hang a lip over. Though they do tell me some of these here prejudiced ignorant Yankees from up North won't tech it ef they know whut it is—think of that!—and so on the bills o' fare at the snack-stands down Memphis-way they have to call it 'tender-loin trout' and fool 'em that-a-way. But you wouldn't ever think a shovelnose wuz kinsfolks to a regular cat, frum his tastes and looks.

"And look a-yonder at all that blamed useless mistle-toe—that's another example of whut I'm sayin'. Give it time and they say it'll choke out and kill off any tree, but whut good is it to anybody? That's whut I'm astin'."

He waved an arm toward a shore-line clothed with almost a tropical greenery, out of which at our approach herons rose flapping and song-birds piped, and over which lay a languid thick sunshine so yellow and so fluid that it was as though all creation had been dipped in melted clover honey.

"Well, I don't know so well about all that, Red," demurred Cap'n January, speaking out of the well-springs of his comparatively recent conversion. "It's not fur us to question the workin's of the Almighty. He knows, ef we don't."

Evidently he meant to dwell further on the subject—and for a fact, later that morning did hark back to it and then his reference was freighted with prophecy—

but now the mail packet Lady Slidell slid out from behind the next bend above the Piney Bluff, bound toward us. She whistled for the meeting, we answering her back, and then as she went churning by to our left, with her swells lifting and gently rocking us, another topic was provided.

"They're telling a funny story about the Slidell," said the steersman, his practiced hands letting the spokes of his wheel slip through them as he set her head over to angle for a crossing. "You remember that trip she made here last month when it seemed like she got befuddled and stuck her nose on mighty near every shallow spot between Danville and the mouth?"

The engineer and mate nodded.

"Well, after she's hit the mud for about the steenth time and is waiting for some other boat to come by and pull her off into deep water, one of the rousters starts rigging up a fishing line. Another rouster asks him what he's fixing to do. And the first one says he's going to catch him a channel-cat. And the second one says to him: 'Huh, nigger, you's wastin' yo' time. How come you 'spec's to ketch a channel-cat w'en dis yere is one boat whut ain't never in de channel?' "

That reminded Mr. Westerman of an older bit of river lore.

"Late the night before the Lloyd Calloway ran onto that long rocky reef just this side of West Mousetail—let's see, that would be going on six years ago?—anyway, the night before it happened there was a hillbilly traveling deck-passage, and he swore afterwards that while they were making a landing he woke up and saw the boat's pet tomcat slip over the side and jump for it; and behind him came a whole procession of rats, big and

little, swarming up out of the hold and from everywhere; and they followed the cat just like sheep behind a leader and blamed if they all didn't skedaddle up the bank and out of sight for good and all. If that country jake had been a steamboatman he'd have known by that she was fixing to sink or something, and if he'd had sense he'd probably have quit her too right there; but being what he was he went back to sleep and when he rousted out the next time along toward daylight, he was in a mess of hard luck and, for the matter of that, so was everybody else aboard. Curious, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't doubt it," said Cap'n January. "Ef a rat knows beforehand that a boat's due fur a wreckin' —and of course a rat always does know somehow— why wouldn't a cat know about it, too? It stands to reason, that's all."

Among his kind it would stand to reason; I could tell that from the looks on the faces of the rest. It was inevitable that mention of one disaster would revive reminiscences of more disasters, which it did, and shortly thereafter, Mr. Westerman was moved to spread on the minutes his part in the historic tragedy of the side-wheeler Pat Cleburne, back in 1876—the year I was born.

"I wasn't on her, though," he stated. "I was on the Arkansaw Belle, that belonged to the same people that owned the Cleburne. We were at the bank above Shotwell's mines, and the Cleburne was going the other way. She'd rounded to let us take on a passenger that'd been carried past his getting-off place by oversight.

"I came out of the engine-room and was standing

at the cattle-guard wiping my hands on a piece of waste; and when she was alongside, about fifteen feet from us, I remarked to myself that her engineer must be cramping her 'scape-pipes awful hard for her to be 'scaping so loud; and the next thing I recollected was two days later, when they were packing me off on a pallet at my home town, and me covered with white lead all over to ease the burns; and the first thing I heard was my old daddy cussing and roaring because he thought the crowd jamming up to take a look might smother me.

"They told me afterwards, though, how I was blown backwards half-way across our deck and how a big hinged bulkhead dropped down, and that was all that kept the scalding steam from getting down in my lungs and killing me. They did think I was dead when they picked me up, and besides, I was black as a pot from being scorched and from the coal dust and soot and all; so they took me for a rouster and they laid me out and piled half a dozen dead bodies on top of me.

"But after a while my partner Chris Merry came along and saw my feet sticking out from underneath and he says, 'That's no nigger, that's Giles Westerman; I know him by his boots because they match mine,' he says, like that. It was lucky for me that Chris Merry always bought the same kind of boots that I did and from the same bootmaker. Because they took his word for it, and they hauled me out, and then they found I was still breathing, and that's how I came to be alive today."

"Yes," put in Mr. Polk, "and I guess no riverman's ever going to forget how Jim Larue stayed with that drifting, burning wreck, trying to chop out Captain Dick Fowler, that was pinned fast under a heavy timber

—stayed until his shirt charred off his back and his hair singed away and his ax handle smoked, and then had to dive overboard with Captain Dick begging him to give him a pistol so's he could put himself out of his misery. But Jim didn't have any pistol—and all they ever found of the captain after the hull went aground was mighty little."

"Jim Larue's a real steamboatman," said Cap'n January. It was as high a tribute as he could pay a brothermate. He paid it reverently.

"Amen to that, Tip," quoth Mr. Jones, as a representative of an allied industry.

CHAPTER XXI—*Stranger Things Have Happened*

NOW this second cousin of mine spoke up; he had not spoken before.

"Speaking of such things reminds me that I was in an explosion once myself—eleven years ago."

"Eleven years ago, huh?" Mr. Polk had caught him up swiftly. "Why, that would be the old Bedford Forrest, wouldn't it? And less than ninety miles above here is where it happened."

"The same," said my cousin, whose name was Maclyn—Con Maclyn. "Maybe you-all would be interested in hearing about my share in that thing?"

It was an utterly superfluous question; steamboaters always were ready to listen to a narrative of some disaster, even though they themselves might know its smallest details. For such would be shop-talk, and to them shop-talk was as the breath of their nostrils, which thing I afterwards came more fully to understand and appreciate. He made his pipe draw better, then:

"I reckon there never was a blacker March night since Old Marster started dividing it off between daylight and darkness than 'twas the night the Bedford Forrest tore herself apart. It was raining to beat All Get-Out, but not much wind, as I recollect. I was buying for one of the Regie contracts, same as I'm doing now, and I'd been up above picking up a few hogshead here and a few hogshead there, and was on my way back down.

"After supper I sat awhile in the cabin talking with first one and then another but mostly with a traveling man from over at St. Louie of the name of Sommers—Louie Sommers. Nice, clever, outspoken fellow he was, too. They found his body next morning up on the hurricane roof, or what was left of it. Near as they could figure out he must've been asleep when her boilers let go. And, gentlemen, he was lifted, bunk and all, right through the top and no telling how high in the air, and then he came straight down, and when they found him there he was, stone dead with hardly a mark on him, and still stretched on his mattress—fact, gentlemen."

"I heared about it myself," stated Mr. Jones. "There ain't no tellin' whut funny things a steamboat blowin' up will do!"

"You're right, there. For instance, take what happened to me. Being tired, I turned in along about ten o'clock, I judge it was; and the last thing I remembered was how the rain was slamming down on the deck planking above me and seeping in on the floor under my stateroom door—and the next thing I remembered was being in the river with the water closing over my head and me fixing to drown. I didn't hear anything; I couldn't exactly say I felt anything, and to this day I haven't been able to specify how I got there and yet still stayed all in one piece. Because where I was sleeping, well forward, that steamboat just naturally was blasted into kindling-wood and scrap-iron.

"All of a sudden, as I'm telling you, I was sinking in cold water. Lordy, how cold that water was! But it being so cold was probably a good thing, because it brought me to. I was pretty thoroughly stunned, I

reckin, for a short spell, and I was hurt besides—three or four ribs stove in here on my right side. But I didn't know about that then. I only knew I was in a peck of trouble. Doubtless it was force of habit more than anything else that made me start swimming. I've been a good swimmer from the time I was a shaver about so high." He gestured. "So you could probably put it down to second nature with me.

"I hit a few licks mechanically, in a general direction, you might say, and then about that time my head began to clear a little bit, and I decided I'd better know where I was going, if anywhere. So I raised myself as high as I could and craned my neck. Near as I could tell, I'd landed spang in the middle of the river, and while I was still more or less in a dazed condition, had drifted some little distance away from the wreck. Because, while I couldn't see a thing, being dizzy, and half-blinded by the rain, I could hear, behind me and off to the left-like, a hullabaloo of people yelling, and what sounded like timbers cracking and banging as they settled down.

"So I said to myself: 'Yonder's where the boat must be; I'd better be getting back to her!' So I headed in that direction. But I seemed to be confused and I lost my bearings and after I'd swum a ways the sounds grew dimmer and seemed farther off than ever. In a minute or two, so it seemed to me, although possibly it was longer than that, I lost them altogether.

"I tried not to get excited. I'd been in tight fixes before and in a dim numbed sort of way I realized that if ever I lost my head I'd be a goner sure. So I quit trying to locate the boat and let the current take me. It was fairly swift, that current. Gentlemen, it was a curious sensation out there alone in this wide river and

that pitch blackness. I got a notion that I was the only living creature left—that those yells I'd been hearing were the last yells of dying men and women.

"But then something proved to me I was wrong. Because right behind me I heard splashings and grunts. Somebody who was swimming faster than I could was overtaking me. Here he came, taking a sort of sideways course, quartering to the current. He was almost touching me before I called out and at that he gave a kind of a scared yelp and sheered off. He spoke though, asking me who I was—or rather what I was—and from his voice I could tell he was a darky—one of the deck hands, it turned out. I couldn't see his face, of course. Six feet away from me I just could make out his head as a sort of blur and that was all.

"I told him I was a passenger. I even remember giving him my full name and my address, which, looking back on it, struck me as a foolish thing to do, everything considered. Still, I did it, just as though letting him know what my middle initial was and where I got my mail were the most important things in the world.

"He told me, still holding space between us as though he was afraid I might grab hold of him and take us both down, that he was pretty sure the closest shore would be the right-hand shore—said he was making in that direction and advised me to do the same. Maybe his eyesight was better than mine or maybe it was just his nigger instinct that made him feel that way about it. He told me that much; and say now it was curious, but our talk was almost casual talk, as if there was no particular danger for either of us and we were just two men, a white man and a black man, that had met up by chance.

"Just as he pulled off and left me he did have the kindness to ask me if I thought I could make it, swimming by myself, and I answered him back that I thought likely I could, and with that we parted and I didn't see him again until next day and then I was in bed under a strange roof, but he wasn't damaged a bit. From talking with him, I judged I'd hit land about a quarter of a mile below where he did.

"I swam and swam, getting weaker all the time. It seemed to me I swam for hours; as a matter of fact I certainly wasn't in the water more than ten or fifteen minutes altogether. I kept straining my eyes to make out the nearest land, but for the life of me I couldn't tell where the sky-line ended and the bank began. It was exactly like blundering along with your head tied up in a black bag.

"My legs went dead on me and started dragging. From the waist down I seemed to be just so much dead weight. I tried treading water—no go. I tried turning over and floating on my back, but somehow or other I couldn't do that either. I just could keep my nose above water, just could manage to move forward a few inches at a stroke.

"Then I saw the most welcome sight that ever a poor perishing devil laid his eyes on. I saw a little dot of light zigzagging down an invisible slope. I didn't need anybody there to tell me what that meant. It meant somebody with a lantern in his hand was working down the face of a bluff toward the river. Sure enough the light was on the right—that darky had been smart—and it didn't seem to be far away from me either, say sixty or seventy yards on a straight line.

"I turned and steered toward it, being helped by the

current which set in that way; and by stretching my neck back I made out to get my mouth above water and I reckon I let out as stout a yell as ever any man did, who was winded and worn-out and crippled besides.

"Back came the answering hail and, golly, how glad I was to hear it! 'Swim this way,' yells a big strong voice, and the owner of that voice starts swinging his lantern to and fro like somebody making signals. So by that I knew he'd reached the level and was waiting for me at the water's edge. As a matter of fact, he'd already waded out clean up to his middle and was standing there with his legs propped against the pull of the eddy.

"With help that close by, it still didn't seem like I'd ever get there. I just wallowed in, crept in, crawled in, nearer and nearer. I didn't dare yell again; I had to save my strength because I was just about gone, and that's the truth of it. I petered out completely, mind, body, everything, when I wasn't four feet from shore.

"Gentlemen, here's the last thing I saw and, nearly senseless as I was, it printed itself on my brain as plain that no part of it ever has faded out or ever can fade: I saw a man's face, red and rough-looking, with the raindrops streaking across it in a pattern-like, and it was a smooth-shaven face, with squinty eyes and a big swollen-looking twisted nose. I saw his old loppy slouch hat and it dripping water; I saw his right hand stretching out full length to grab for me. I saw this much in the little foggy blurred ring of light that his lantern made where he held it above him at the length of his left arm—and after that I didn't see anything more or know anything more for about ten hours."

"Where was you then?" asked Mr. Jones.

"In a little log farmhouse about a quarter of a mile back on the bluff. After I'd been hauled out, some of the neighbors toted me there, hardly knowing whether I was still breathing or not. The noise of the explosion —which was something I never heard at all—had brought the natives out all along that stretch; then, of course, by that time—next day, I mean—the news had spread.

"When I opened my eyes I was laying on a pallet against the wall, and an old country woman was fussing over me and an old man was sitting over by the fire, not doing anything in particular but just sitting. I tried to sit up and she told me just to lay still and not worry—that a local doctor from somewhere back in the hills was on the job and he'd get round to fixing me up as soon as he'd tended to the worse hurt ones—poor devils that had been scalded or smashed up.

"She might have saved her words—I didn't feel much like stirring. I wanted to rest and collect up my scattered wits. What had happened seemed like a bad dream that was all mixed up—not a dream I'd had the night before, mind you, but more like one I'd dreamt months and months before. So I rested awhile and scrap by scrap I pieced the tale of it together inside of my mind.

"When I'd got myself a little better organized, as you might say, I asked who it was that had hauled me out. 'A wayfarer-like,' says the old woman. 'He's been squattin' on the bank-aidge and claimin' to be fishin' and trappin'. He wuz the fust one got thar after it happened. He don't belong hereabouts.' The way she said it struck me as sort of peculiar, as though possibly she might be holding something back.

" 'What's his name?' I says.

" 'Luce Spivey,' she says.

"The old man put in his oar here: 'Leastwise, that's the name he's goin' by,' he says, and then he shut up.

"I says: 'Well, whoever or whatever he may be, I'd like mightily to see him. I owe him a big debt of gratitude. If he hadn't got there just when he did I wouldn't be here now.'

" 'Mebbe, mister, you'll be seein' him afterwhile,' says the old woman; 'he's down yon by the river with mighty nigh ever' other able-bodied man and boy frum out of this bend—and more acomin' ez the word travels onward. There'll be a lot of prime pickin's comin' off that there wreck whar she's drifted inshore 'bout a mile below here,' she says, 'and plenty of pore crippled-up folks to be tuck keer of besides. They've already fished out six dead ones,' she says.

"I tried asking more questions, but that old couple were pretty glum and sort of suspicious. Well, you gentlemen can understand how that might be in a scattered community where it pays to keep your mouth shut. They're still making an abundance of moonshine through that district, I hear, and they were making even more of it eleven years back; and gabby strangers that showed too much curiosity weren't exactly welcome—although how that pair could possibly figure me for a revenuer I can't imagine."

"Well, the old Shemwell-Hines feud was still raging along there then," put in Mr. Polk. "Shemwells on one bank and Hineses on the other, pot-shotting at one another about once in so often, and nearly everybody in the vicinity more or less concerned in it. People in a feud country are liable to be close-mouthed—it pays."

"That also might help to explain their attitude," said Maclyn, accepting the amendment. "Anyhow, I couldn't get much out of them. Well, gentlemen, to shorten up the story, I left there without ever seeing this rescuer of mine that they called Luce Spivey. He must have been pretty busy at his salvaging operations because though I sent word to him he never came.

"Along about dinner-time a country sawbones arrived, all splashed up with mud, and he bound up my chest for me and gave me a shot of morphine to ease the pain and helped load me into a spring-wagon bedded down in bed-quilts; and they fetched me out a matter of twenty-two miles over one of the roughest roads in creation and put me aboard a train, and by midnight I was home and powerfully glad to be there, let me tell you. Inside of a couple of weeks I was all right again, except that my side would ache like thunder just before a change in the weather. It still does, sometimes, although not as bad as it used to.

"Before they packed me off though I gave the old man and the old woman something for their trouble. I was in my underclothes but luckily I'd gone to bed the night before with a money belt around my waist, and it was still strapped on me. You see, I have to carry considerable ready cash with me on these buying trips, and that's the handiest way to carry it, I find.

"They didn't want to accept money for caring for anybody in distress—you know how the run of the breed is along this river? Hospitality is their creed and their religion, and what they've got, poor as it may be, is yours or anybody else's for the asking. I almost had to force my little gift on them, and yet the Lord knows they must've needed a few dollars.

"By the old man I sent the biggest share of what I had left to this man Spivey and along with it my everlasting thanks. I wrote him after I got home—wrote twice to the nearest post-office—but both letters came back undelivered."

"Well, that certainly is an interesting tale!" said Mr. Polk. "And so you never saw the fellow again?"

"Hold on!" said Maclyn. "I didn't say that. There's a sequel to the thing, and if you gentlemen don't care to believe it I wouldn't blame you much because I'll admit myself it don't sound the least bit reasonable. It sounds far-fetched and impossible. Talk about your coincidences!"

"Don't tell it yit," pleaded Cap'n January. "I want to hear the rest and I've got to go below whilst we're makin' a quick landin' here. I won't be gone more'n five minutes."

CHAPTER XXII—*Would Anybody Believe It?*

WHERE a small heap of cross-ties awaited our coming, with an overalled woodsman guarding it, we swung in, to a roaring of the whistle and a panting through the scape-pipes, and our noises frightened two heavy-winged, long-legged birds of the bittern tribe out of their hiding in a clump of possum haws. They made a Japanesy composition for the picture as they labored up and away against a background of blossoming dogwoods and glowing brilliant redbuds. Cap'n January was as good as his word—better. Impatient as I was for the succeeding instalment of this narrative, it seemed to me he hardly had clattered down the pilot-house stairs when he was hastening back again to rejoin our group.

"Now, let 'er go!" he urged, and my kinsman, having reloaded his pipe, obeyed him.

"That experience of mine sort of cured me of riding the river for a while. I thought I was cured for good and all, but you see I'm not. Still, I hugged the hearthstone for a considerable spell. The warehousing and rehandling business—that kept me busy over across-country from here in Shoalburg, where I was born and raised and where this boy's people"—he pointed to me—"for nearly a hundred years before him likewise have been born.

"Four years went by until it came to be the forepart

of the springtime again. One night after supper I got restless sitting at home. So I bundled up—it was raining in sheets and pretty tolerable cold for this climate—and I waded down our little main street to the Downs House; that's the principal hotel, seeing it's the only one there. Old man Heck Downs runs it—a mighty clever old fellow and well-liked.

"When I stepped into the little lobby the usual flock of loafers were missing, which wasn't to be wondered at, the weather being so bad. Even the bar was deserted. There was a drummer over at the writing-table posting-up orders or something and old man Heck was humped up behind a desk in his little office, and that was everybody. So I sat down and gassed with Heck for maybe half an hour, maybe three quarters. I must've bored him because he dozed off with his head on his arms.

"To kill time I picked up a newspaper that was crumpled up in a chair. Mostly, if we wanted an out-of-town paper we subscribed for a Louieville paper or a Memphis paper; one of two families in town took a St. Louie paper. But this was a New Orleans paper, about a week or ten days old. I judge some transient had brought it along with him from down below and after he read it, he'd thrown it aside and probably it had been knocking about the place ever since.

"I started glancing through it, mainly dodging the news, which was stale, of course, but picking out something here and there that seemed worth reading. I'd fooled along that fashion to the next to the last page when down amongst some advertisements a heading caught my eye. It said: 'One Thousand Dollars Reward.' Under it was a picture of a man—one of those

scratchy looking pictures like the papers still run sometimes, I believe they call 'em chalk-plates. And under that was a description and at the tail-end a notice saying the above party was wanted for a murder committed on such-and-such a date, which would make it about two months before, at some little town or other in Louisiana that I'd never heard of, and that for information leading to his arrest, et cetera, et cetera, the state would pay a thousand dollars—you know, the regular rigmarole.

"The picture, such as it was, showed the fellow they wanted was a pretty hard-looking cuss, that is if this likeness did him justice; and the description went on to say that his height was such-and-such and his habits thus-and-so and his general appearance this-and-that. It didn't make much impression on me. I just idled along through it all because I had nothing better to do. Next to the fact that the authorities must want this fellow mighty badly to be willing to pay such a fat price for him, about the only thing that struck in my mind was one of the names the paper said he used—Slicer. He probably had other aliases, it said, but the name Slicer stayed with me not only because it was an uncommon name but also because I happened to remember that an aunt of my wife had married a man named Slicer in North Carolina before the war and he was killed fighting under Lee in Virginia.

"After a little I flung the paper aside and turned up my overcoat collar and shook out my umbrella and got ready to go home and go to bed. I told old Heck good night, and he just grunted back, and I stepped out on the porch that ran along the front of the Downs House facing the plank sidewalk. It was black as the inside

of a pot out there. There was a lantern fastened on a post about seven feet above the floor at the head of the porch steps, but for some reason or other it had gone out.

"I started to go back and rouse up Heck and tell him his light was out, but then I decided not to bother him, he being drowsy. So I got out a box of matches and managed to make one burn and I tilted up the chimney and touched the wick. It wasn't lack of coal-oil that'd made it go out, because immediately the flame caught.

"At that precise second, while I was pushing the chimney back into place, there came the clunking of feet on the lower steps and somebody came up out of the darkness and stopped on the same level with me just inside the circle of light coming from the top of that wooden lamp-post.

"I squinted and looked, and there, gentlemen, at approximately the same distance, at the same angle and under almost identically the same atmospheric conditions as on that night four years back, stood the man who'd hauled me out of the water after the Bedford Forrest blew up. There, by all that's holy, was the picture reproduced in the only way which would make it humanly possible for me to recognize him instantly—the rain-drops slanting across his big red face, with its thick skewed nose all slick and wet; the rain dripping off the brim of his old soggy wool hat; the fogged-up lantern light falling squarely on him from just above his head, and him staring hard at me.

"And right then and there, in the shock of that moment, I had another shock, for now, like a flash, I realized something else that was just as incredible and just as startling, or even more so. That reward notice

in that New Orleans paper—why hadn't I put two and two together whilst I was reading it? But now I did.

" 'Hold on!' I said to him, speaking sharp. 'Don't go inside that hotel until I've had something to say to you.'

"He stared harder than ever, not saying anything but squatting his shoulders a little and sort of gathering his figure together like a man fixing to spring forward or backwards, as the situation might require.

" 'I know you,' I said next. 'We met—once.'

"With that he hunched still lower and his right hand slid back under his coat-tail to his hip pocket. That made me surer than ever that I was on the right track.

" 'Never mind pulling your gun,' I says. 'I'm a friend.'

"That seemed to check him. At least he didn't draw, though he still kept his hand at his flank.

" 'I never seen you before,' he says, and his tone is suspicious, hostile really.

" 'Think back,' I says. 'Four years ago almost to the day, and on just such a night as this, you dragged a drowning man out of Tennessee River. Well, pardner, I'm that man.'

"I put out my hand to him, but without touching it or offering to take it he says, still surly and watchful: 'Admittin' that mout be true, whut of it?'

" 'For one thing,' I says, 'I've been waiting all this time to tell you face to face how grateful I've been. And I've been hoping that some day, somehow, somewhere I might get a chance to repay the eternal debt I owe you. Pardner, unless I'm badly mistaken, I've got my chance right now.'

" 'Meanin' by that jest whut?' he says.

" 'Just this,' I says. 'You were known then as Spivey. Unless I'm mighty wrong, you've been known since then as—Slicer.'

"He stiffened hard and backed down one step from me, ready to shoot, as I could tell, but still not drawing.

" 'That's why I'm telling you not to go into this hotel here,' I says. 'Because,' I says, 'there's a paper —a New Orleans paper—in that lobby, and in that paper, if I'm not away off, is a printed description of you and a picture of you, or at least a picture purporting to be of you, and a notice of a reward for you. That paper's been there for days, I figure. Probably a dozen persons in this little town have already read the notice. There are two men inside now. It's practically certain one of those two men has read it and probably he's remembered what he read. As to the other man I can't say. Now, I don't care what you've done or why you did it. I'm anxious to help you any way I can in return for your having saved my life. So don't go inside that house.'

" 'I won't,' he says. 'Much oblige' fur the warnin'.'

" 'When did you get here?' I says.

" 'Tonight—about an hour ago.'

" 'When were you figuring on pulling out?'

" 'In the mawnin'.'

" 'Don't wait for morning,' I says. 'Take my urging and go now—this minute.'

" 'I reckin that's sound,' he says, and by now he's got down to the foot of the steps and his figure is no more than a dim clump. 'The railroad's straight down this here road, ain't it?' he says.

" 'Yes,' I says—'two miles brings you to Catawba. It's a little place but it's got a station, and the fast

train for Louieville that's due in about an hour from now makes a regular stop there.'

" 'I'll be on her when she pulls out,' he says, and his voice is still farther off.

" 'How are you fixed for money?' I says. 'Do you need anything at all?'

"There's no answer—no good-by, no nothing. He's evidently quit the wooden pavement for the muddy road because I can't even hear the sound of his feet. I'm left there peering into the darkness and into the silence and I'm all alone, and there's not a sound except the rain pelting down."

My cousin paused for a breath of time.

"Well, gentlemen," he said then, "there you are. That's all there is to it. I've never laid eyes on that man since, never directly or indirectly have I had trace of him. Hair and hide, he just disappeared out of my life. But for my own satisfaction I did keep track of the case against him down yonder in Louisiana. From time to time I've made inquiries by round-about sources. The last time I heard from there, which was less than three months ago, that thousand-dollar reward was still unclaimed . . . Got a match, somebody?—my pipe's gone out."

It was Mr. Jones who supplied him. Having done so he quit the company, saying as he went that it must be near dinner-time. But first, with an awkward gesture which seemed to betoken a vague embarrassment, he patted the chronicler on the shoulder. For myself, I interpreted it as evidence of an appreciation for a worth-while narrative.

"Well, well, well!" Cap'n January was speaking now. "Say, that's somethin' that certainly oughter be

wrote out and printed sometime. At that, I mistrust whether lots of folks wouldn't credit it."

"That would be the main trouble," agreed Maclyn. "Seems like something is always happening in real life that you wouldn't dare put in a story-book because it sounds too impossible. Facts can be as outlandish as you please, but I notice that fiction has to stick closer to what sounds plausible."

In the light of my subsequent education as a spinner of yarns, I know my cousin uttered a great verity when he said that.

"Still and notwithstandin', you can't never tell," went on Cap'n January. "Mebbe some of these days some feller'll happen along that could fix that there experience of yours up fur retailin' to the general public. I've about decided that nothin' ever really goes plum' to waste in this here world we live in. There's a meanin' to everything and a purpose to everything, ef we could figger it out, only we can't, jest bein' poor gropin' mortals. Take them seemin'ly worthless things—shovelnoses and the like—that Red Ham wuz lamentin' himself over a little while ago. It don't sound reasonable, I'll admit, but mebbe in His own good time the Lord'll find uses fur them even."

Today it stands as proved that away back yonder, thirty-odd years ago, the Prayin' Mate was right. For lo, the story has been written and herein it is printed. And furthermore, at least two of us who heard him have lived to see a time when men would be lopping off the clumped mistletoe and shipping it away along with the felled holly trees and the garnered bushes of the red winterberry, to help make Christmas cheer for the nation; and when other men, and many of them—so

many indeed that their little gasoline-pushed dredgers form veritable fleets—would be scooping up the luckless mussel and shucking him out of his shell and by tons upon tons bearing his shell to riverside factories, where it yields up shiny disks for the pearl buttons which fasten the garments of the multitude.

And as for the once humble and despised shovelnose cat which the naturalists tell us is no catfish at all but a sturgeon of merits, with a membranous spoon for an upper lip, she, schooling up from the gulf with intent to spawn in quiet side-waters, is annually welcomed by a host of jubilant enemies eager to take her and rob her of her roe, pounds of it sometimes being stripped from a single specimen, and those precious eggs go at fabulous prices to certain up-country plants, there to be treated by the subtle chemistries of modern ingenuity, and anon to become "genuine imported Russian caviar"—if you don't care what you say and the Pure Food Law people don't interfere!—at six dollars for the smaller tin or twelve for the larger size.

That's about all except for one supplementary bit. Last spring, on a shady by-street in a town a thousand and sundry miles from where I'm writing this, I encountered Mr. Westerman, retired now and crowding close on his seventy-ninth birthday, but still the same kindly, discreet, dependable person he always was; and we stopped for a confab, renewing ancient memories; and all at once he said this—which, take it or leave it, is an honest recital by me of what was said:

"You recall that time up in the old Promised Land's pilot-house when you were a gangling kid in knee-britches, and Connie Maclyn, who was related to your family some way, told a certain story? Yes, I see you

do. Well now, I'm going to tell you something you never even dreamed of before—something I've been waiting to tell you all this long time since the late Hamilton G. Jones, him, you remember, that we used to call Red Ham Gravy Jones, passed on.

"I reckin you didn't see the look on Ham's face when Maclyn was mentioning that bad egg who pulled him out of the river, the same one he claimed he met afterwards under mighty strange circumstances. Well, I saw it and I knew what it meant because I was the only one there that knew the secret. Man, I'm stating to you that some funny things—things you'd never be able to imagine—keep happening on this earth. I realize that more and more the older I get.

"Here's what I'm driving at: That Spivey or that Slicer—which neither of them was his right name, although both sounding a little bit like it—was Ham Jones's own half-brother, the black sheep of an otherwise decent family of folks. You're a story-writer now. Well, I dare you to write out that story, adding on what I've just told you, and see if anybody will believe it!"

I wonder whether anybody will.

CHAPTER XXIII—*Low-Combed Roosters*

THEN there was the old-time steamboat gambler, that sterling type which is so familiar to, and probably so beloved by, nearly all readers of our domestic fiction.

You know the type, of course; we all of us know it—tall, dark, courtly, and black-haired, with drooping mustachios and inscrutable eyes; polished of manner, correct in choice of language, aristocratic and chivalric of bearing, plainly a man with a hidden past; merciless in action but ready always to surrender his ill-gotten gains at sight of a woman's tears; having invariably those long slender fingers and that close-fitting broadcloth coat and in the bosom of the shirt of fine linen and pleated ruffles the three diamond studs; making a specialty of fleecing the hard-drinking breeder of thoroughbreds from up at Lexington, or, preferably, the reckless young plantation-owner from down below Natchez; winning a dozen negro slaves or a stableful of racing colts on the final hand, only, at the bidding of some quickly kindled romance, to fling the spoils back at the dazed loser—oh, altogether a glamorous and fascinating figure for the hero of your narrative of steamboating life or for its villain or, more frequently, for its combination hero-villain.

But say, what boobs those adventurous planters and those gallant stockmen of the Old South must have

been! How uniformly anxious were they to be ruined; how inept at detecting the transparent and obvious designs of him who never stepped out of character nor departed by so much as the breadth of a hair from the rôle, but on the contrary went about proclaiming a nefarious calling not only by his costume and his deportment but by the very sheen of his high-lacquered boots! He might as well have carried a large and sable banner with a skull and crossbones on it. There must have been something about the mere act of taking passage on a river steamer which rendered the victims blind, deaf, and imbecilic, from the moment of touching a toe to the stage plank.

Mind you, though, this writer would cast no aspersions upon the truthfulness of portraiture so famous and so repetitious. A likeness which has been drawn hundreds of times by as many gifted pens surely had its authentic original. The present writer merely pleads that here now stands one who was born and reared in a steamboating town at the junction of two steamboat-trodden rivers, yet never met that person except in a story-book, nor ever met anybody who ever met him except in story-books. Moreover, neither the first nor the second crookster who figured in the event hereafter described—for there were at least two of them—bore the slightest resemblance, spiritual or temporal, to the splendid professional steamboat gambler of history and tradition. Comparing such gentry to him would smack of impiety. It would be like coupling a brace of common dunghill cocks with the trimmed, steel-spurred champion of a hundred mains.

These dubious chanticleers hailed from Chicago, as it turned out. Their barnyard may have been South

Clark Street, and probably was, but no doubt the dingy back rooms of dives along "The Levee" of that growing and careless metropolis knew them well and favorably. They were—but that also would develop later—too ornery for Clarkson's Great Wagon Circus which, to anyone having even the slightest acquaintance with the governing moralities of Clarkson's Great Wagon Circus, was sufficient proof of their superlative qualities along the lines of being ornery.

Having by request severed connections with Clarkson's at a point some distance remote from either rails or rivers, they journeyed cross-country to an infinitesimal waterside hamlet and there booked on the Promised Land when she came along. They were heading homeward to make a fresh start. If en route they might pick up a stake, why, so much the better. Other passengers got on where they did, the group including a traveling-man with sample cases and the air about him of intending to be a breezy and seasoned cosmopolitan; a quietly dressed young woman who was decidedly pretty and, on the whole, rather refined-looking; and three countrymen convoying a small herd of ticky cattle down to the mouth. For convenience and for the time being, let A and B stand for the representatives of the predatory classes of a great city, C the sportive drummer, D the pretty young woman and X, Y and Z the drovers.

With D the affiliated Messrs. A and B had no visible dealings and she gave them no second look. Nor did A and B waste either their time or their talents upon the drovers. They had contempt for the yokelry upon whom they mainly fattened—it is a fact known to biologists that the wolf despises the lambkin's intelli-

gence, while the fox regards the duckling as a fool—but for business reasons they had studied the habits of their simple-minded prey. Experience had taught them that bumpkins journeying to market almost surely would have empty pockets. So the herdsmen they inwardly sneered at and ignored. But as for C—buoyant and natty Mr. C, with his gay feathers and his man-of-the-world manner—this, now, was a different matter. Already they had appraised him as one ripe for a swift but thorough picking. So, right away, they took a stateroom.

These others who had come on her along with them paid for first-class passage but secured no such special quarters. It was a pleasant run, mostly through daylight, to their common destination; the guards provided coolness and the accommodations of comfortable chairs, whereas indoors was stuffy and overly warm, what with the heat coming up through the flooring from the engine-room and the boilers below. Excepting at dinner-time the main cabin remained almost deserted, and the gilded wooden acorns and elaborately meshed curlicues of its ceiling looked down on an empty vista. As to her interior decorative scheme, the Promised Land was of a pattern with practically all passenger-carrying craft in these waters. For purposes of securing light draft, a builder would build the sides of thin matched boardings, would strip away weight wherever weight was not absolutely essential; for motives of economy an owner might skimp on his furnishings and his dining-room equipment, but nobody ever heard of builder or owner who spared expense when it came to the luxurious fretwork which made such white-and-golden glory overhead. Travelers did

not often complain of bare little cubicles for sleeping in, but they expected that heavy grandeur in the salon and they got it, too.

It was during dinner-time that the wily plotters, having forethoughtedly claimed seats at the table where he sat, scraped an acquaintance with the downy commercialist. This part of it proved easy; really it was almost too easy to be zestful. Here was a sucker who literally snatched the bait out of the fisher's fingers. A little judicious flattery, a shrewd appeal to his natural cupidity, a mere suggestion in passing that he seemed a person of sporting instincts, and lo, the barb was in the gaped maw. After that you couldn't shake him off the hook if you tried.

Show-down poker, three-sided and the cards dealt on a bunk, was the game they played behind the closed doors of the anglers' stateroom, and by this show-down poker, after some spectacular and encouraging early successes, the gudgeon was beautifully despoiled. The almost unbeatable hand—aces full on kings—ran up against what, in a competition which had been reduced to two entries, was the absolutely unbeatable one. With the limit by mutual consent lifted, with spirited betting back and forth before the draw, with raising and reraising and more raising until cash and currency mounted in heaps on the wrinkled coverlet, the thing was done to a queen's taste, or being statistically exact about it, to the taste of four queens. There they were, outspread—Kate, Maud, Gertrude and Dirty Dora—read 'em, loser, read them pasteboards and weep!

Indeed the loser seemed about ready to weep when he issued forth, a stricken Sir Knight of the Dolorous Countenance, from the deadfall. He wore that stunned,

crushed-in look which is so unmistakable—and so betraying. Even his hand-me-down plumage took on a suddenly wilted and bedraggled look, almost as though the catastrophe which emptied his purse likewise had rumpled his near-silk cravat, had rubbed the gloss from his stylish tan low-quarters. It was inevitable that the tragic news should spread, since a steamboat is but a small self-contained floating community where everybody's business very soon gets to be anybody's business. This news did spread with elaborations and exaggerations, from this quarter to that until it reached the ears of Cap'n Tip January, who being at the moment off watch was taking his ease and a smoke in the cross-hall of the texas.

Under the existing ownership, play for high stakes was not tolerated aboard the Promised Land. To be sure, the black members of the deck-crew had an occasional bout at craps. To order out the craps would have been to lose your deck-crew; and sometimes some of the deck-passengers who, generally speaking, were black also, joined in that pastime. But here now was a bay horse of another color.

Cap'n January did not have to brace his lower jaw—it was one of those lower jaws which chronically remain braced—but an added ominous glinting projected itself into his eyes as straightway he started below. He meant to confront the guilty confederates and make them disgorge. After that, his intention was to stop the steamer and set the unsavory pair ashore and afoot somewhere in the woods—in a strip of good thick lonesome woods by preference. He'd teach them better than to come putting a bad name on a decent steamboat.

But he had been a bit too late about bestirring him-

self. Those malefactors already had departed out of that venue. Their joint opinion had been that it were better to endure a temporary marooning at any given spot no matter how inhospitable or sparsely settled that spot might be, than to bide on where explanations might be difficult and restitution might be demanded and, what was worse, compelled. Therein they had shown much wisdom. Never having seen Cap'n January before, they at once had figured him as the sort of individual who might make the surroundings very unsalubrious for you, not to say downright unhealthy, did you cross him in his wishes or defy him in his authority.

It was his deputy in command, when he met him on the hurricane roof and questioned him, from whom the cap'n learned his quest was a vain one.

"You mean them two tough-lookin' scrubs that got on frum Dilday's along with quite a passel more?" asked the second mate. "Them two, that one of 'em was cockeyed and the other'n had on a kind of a cheap-jack fancy vest with grease spots on it?"

"Of course."

"Well, ef that's them I reckin it's safe to say they ain't with us no longer."

"What d'ye mean, Cal, not with us no longer? They paid their way clear on through."

"That mout be, but when we run into Mouth of Jonathan to throw off them bales of sackin', I seen both of 'em dustin' out. They snuck up the bank with grip-sacks in their hands and so fur ez I taken notice, they didn't stop nor even look back after they hit the flat ground. Yes, suh, they jest natchelly lit a shuck. I says to myself it's funny them two should be quittin' us here but—"

Cap'n January had heard enough. He spun on his heel and stalked away raging inwardly and silently, he having given up swearing aloud since he got religion. His ire was all the greater for being bottled up—and impotent. It probably was too late now to turn back and seek to intercept the absconded rogues. Besides he had his schedule to maintain. But he promised himself that if ever that ill-favored pair crossed his path again there would be a summary reckoning. That hope seemed very faint, though.

On the next level below it was his turn to be halted. The skipper intercepted him at the foot of the companionway. With the officer was that sedate young woman who likewise had joined them at Dilday's. The look on her decidedly handsome face advertised that here was one more of his boat's company who had cause for worriment.

"This lady here just a little bit ago came to me saying she was in trouble," explained the master, "and I told her that seeing as you was one of the main stockholders and me only a hired hand, as you might say, that maybe she'd better have a little private talk with you."

"Yes, ma'am, jest ez you think best," agreed Cap'n January, addressing the stranger. "Let's slip along the guards here a little piece, ef you don't mind? We're kind of crowded this trip, with passengers and freight both, but we'll make out to find a quiet place off by ourselves."

He led her where, behind the jog of some crates and boxes piled on the boiler-deck, was a little closet-like recess enclosed on three sides. Standing very close to him and with her distressed eyes lifted imploringly to his, she began to speak her piece:

"Captain, I hardly know how to say it. But I—I mean we—are in such a desperate plight."

"We?"

"Yes sir, one other person and myself. You know, don't you—or if you don't know you ought to—that early this afternoon on this very boat of yours a young gentleman named Cudlipp was robbed of two hundred and sixty dollars—all he had in the world except a few cents—by two rascals that afterwards skipped out?"

"I heard somebody'd been skinned out of some sich sum and I guessed it'd be about all the loose money he had on him. Crooks like they must a'been wouldn't never stop till they'd peeled the pelt plum' off. Ez a matter of fact, I wuz jest fixin' to look up this here young feller and git the straight of it frum him—not that that would do any good, now that it's too late to collar the scound'els."

"Please don't do that yet—not until you've heard my story anyhow. I'm hoping and praying you won't feel called upon to go to him at all after you've heard it; and please don't tell me yet there's no hope of helping him. I can speak to you in absolute confidence, can't I?" She answered herself! "Yes, I know I can!"

"Yessum, you kin. But before you go any further lemme ast you one thing: whut's your particular interest in the matter of this here young man makin' a fool of hisself?"

"The biggest, deepest interest that anybody on earth could have. He's to be my husband. Or at least he was to have been. We were going to be married tonight as soon as we got to port. This—this"—her voice broke pitifully—"this was to have been the beginning,

really, of our little honeymoon. But now—" She threw her arms out in a gesture of hopelessness.

Under his breath Cap'n January whistled a rueful little whistle, but said nothing. He was waiting for her to go on. Composing herself, she did go on, winking as though to keep the tears back:

"My name is Effie Hopkins. You'll find it on the register at the clerk's desk. This season I've been traveling with my mother and my stepfather on Perkins' Floating Palace. They're professionals under the team name of Matt and Margie Golden. They've both been playing showboats all their lives. And I was raised on a showboat from a child. But I never did like showboating life. They tried to make a performer out of me, and I tried to be one, for my mother's sake. I got so I could do a little bit on the stage—not very much, though, or not very well—and for the last two or three years I've been a regular member of the troupe, drawing ten dollars a week.

"But my heart never was in it, captain. I got so tired of it all. It wasn't real, it wasn't natural, it wasn't what I wanted. What I wanted was a little home of my own somewhere—a little place—I didn't care how little it was or how humble or how simple—that I could call mine. Well, this spring instead of going down to the bayou country and working back up in the fall, Perkins decided to work the side streams between Gallipolis—that's the winter quarters—and Cairo. They've been doing the Cumberland River towns. They're almost through now. Week after next they'll start in over here, working the Tennessee."

Cap'n January clucked understandingly. She was using a vernacular with which he had acquaintance.

"Well, it seemed as though going up the Cumberland instead of sticking to the main streams—the Ohio and the Mississippi—was going to bring me my chance for happiness at last. Because, here week before last when we were playing Clarksville, I met Arthur—Mr. Cudlipp, I mean . . ." She paused a moment with the air of one who mentally bridges a period. "We fixed it all up when we were laying-up over last Sunday at some little town between Clarksville and Dover. I forget the name of it but it was too small even for a showboat to play. I pretended I was going ashore for a walk; that's how I slipped away from my mother. And out on the bank Arthur was waiting for me, and that's where we fixed everything up.

"So early this morning, long before daylight, I got up and dressed and packed my bag and got away without letting anybody see me, and a farmer that I'd arranged with was waiting with a buggy and he drove me across to this river. Arthur was already there—he'd been selling goods to the country merchants in that neighborhood—and we came aboard your boat.

"We didn't want to take any chance on being caught up with. I was afraid my stepfather or somebody might come after me and try to make me turn back, so we decided that while we were aboard together we'd just act as though each one of us was traveling alone and didn't so much as know the other. And then—then this terrible thing had to happen and oh, captain, I don't know what's going to become of me!

"I knew beforehand that Arthur had this weakness for gambling. He admitted it to me and promised me he was going to give it up for good and all. But I know why he gave 'way to temptation today, of all days,

and I can forgive him. He—he wanted to be able to buy me a real wedding gift and have something left to help us start up housekeeping with. And now it's all gone—including eighteen dollars of mine that I'd given him to keep. I'd been able to save that much from my wages, a few cents at a time, because I turned over about all I earned to my mother. And nearly every cent of his own that he had is gone too and—captain, you mustn't let this go any further—there was nearly a hundred dollars more that didn't belong to him at all. It belonged to the firm he travels for—he'd collected it for them and was taking it in. And he'll be disgraced if he can't pay it back. They'll discharge him with a terrible mark on his name. They might even prosecute him. He says they're so very strict about money matters. And the whole thing will come out—nearly everybody on the boat seems to know it already—and I'll be shamed. We can't get married; between us we haven't money enough for the license and the preacher. And how would we live afterwards —Arthur with no position at all!

"Oh, captain, what are we going to do? Who is going to help us? It might not sound like much to some people but, oh, captain, it's just utter ruin for us." She put her face in her cupped hands and made little choked, sobbing sounds.

During this recital Cap'n January had been doing some intense thinking. Merely because this lamentable affair had come to pass on his boat, no one, legally, probably had any claim against him. But how about morally? He was proudly jealous of the untarnished record of the Promised Land. Above all else he desired that she might continue to enjoy her reputation as "a

family boat," a boat protected by a vigilant crew and an honest ownership from scandal or the breath of scandal. While he weighed the merits of the issue on the balances of his private ethics, the grief and the despair of this forlorn young petitioner worked upon his sentimental side. Cap'n January had a sentimental side to his nature, although, looking at him, you might never have suspected it.

So, almost before she finished speaking, he reached his decision. What she told him, her manner of telling it, the look out of her eyes, the trembling of her lip—these had inclined the scales in her favor.

"How much in all did you say the money come to?" he asked.

"Two hundred and sixty dollars."

"All right then, quit frettin'. You're goin' to git it back—not him, but you. I reckin it'll be safer in your keepin'."

"Oh, captain, how can I—how can we—ever thank you?"

"Easy enough—by you gittin' his solemn promise to leave playin' cards be frum now on. I don't aim to go nigh him; it's fur you to tell him in your own way how this here matter has been fixed up. For the time bein' it kin be a private transaction betwixt you and me. I gather that's the way you'd ruther it would be, ain't it?" She nodded her head vigorously, her eyes suddenly alight. "Later on, I figger I'll have to lay the proposition before the gentlemen at my home that're pardners with me in this here steamboat. If they agree with me that I done the right thing in takin' on the responsibility of handin' back the amount of whut your sweetheart lost, why so much the better; ef they don't,

you needn't worry yourself none because you mout say that after all it's been more or less my own fault fur not sizin' up them two scalawags and warnin' them beforehand ag'inst tryin' any of their monkey-business on our passengers. You stay right here a minute, please. I won't be gone more'n a minute or two."

When he returned from the purser's office and put into her eager grasp a plumpish roll of bills and bank-notes, she shoved the money into the bosom of her frock, disregarding his suggestion that she count it first to make sure the total was right. Instead, she caught up one of his hands in both of hers and squeezed it and caressed it.

"That there ain't a-tall necessary, miss," he protested. He was embarrassed and showed it.

"I'm only giving you my receipt," she declared. "No I'm not! Here's your receipt, captain!"

And almost before he realized what she meant to do she had done it. She had kissed him twice, full on the mouth.

After she was gone he stood there behind the freight-pile for a minute, fingering at the ends of his mandarin's mustache. His face wore a startled look but by no means a displeased look.

CHAPTER XXIV—*Bland*
Mr. Bland

THE young woman who had called herself Effie Hopkins did not look back as she sped along the cluttered guards. She was afraid to look. She was pretty good at acting; in her line she had to be. All the same, she was fearful that, looking back, she might reveal the tremendous jubilance she felt.

The trick had been turned with such beautiful simplicity! She had not been required to draw upon the deeper reservoirs of her trained emotionalism; nor forced to resort to the half-veiled threat of bringing a suit against the owners in order to extort payment. That was to have been the heaviest shot in her reserve batteries, but it had not been necessary to fire it against a citadel so ready to surrender to her make-believe tears. Sometimes these rubes were so ridiculously soft. Well, she had softened a trifle, too, and for no good reason either.

That kissing stuff, now; that, you might say, had been so much wasted ammunition. She wondered that a vague impulse should have led her to expend it when the job already was satisfactorily finished. There were no dividends in that sort of thing. Kisses were for persuasion or for clinching the bargain in an operation where the customer seemed reluctant or turned suspicious. Why she had thrown these kisses in for

good measure, as it were, she could not exactly explain even to herself.

Anyhow, she had more important things to think about. She had to think about her own getaway. The sooner that was accomplished the better, for herein lay possible danger for her. However, her luck still held.

The Promised Land, having left behind some minor consignments on the right side, was swinging on an elongated slant toward the left-hand bank. That fact promised well, since the left bank, descending, was the proper one for her purposes. At the end of a two-mile diagonal, the packet nosed cautiously in below a low shelf of land on which stood a cabin or two and one frame house and a tiny general store. Her accomplices had taken her hand-bag with their own belongings. As she descended the forward companionway and followed the mud clerk and a file of burdened rousters out over the lowered gangplank, there was about her appearance nothing to cause comment, nor about her actions either. She had the casual indifferent manner of one who stepped ashore for curiosity—perhaps to see the darkies hazing a few items of freight off and rustling a few other items on, or perhaps to take a few turns back and forth for exercise.

She did take a turn or two and at the conclusion of the second lap of her promenade she nimbly vanished behind the little store. Keeping the building between her and the boat, she continued her stroll. It took her across a grassy rutted field and brought her to a dirt road leading inland toward scraggly adjacent woods. Almost immediately she was in these woods. So far she had met no one, had been watched by no inquisitive eyes, had not heard anything or seen anything to sug-

gest that her desertion of the steamer had been observed at all.

Presently there came to her ears those familiar sounds which signified the withdrawal of the boat into the deeper waters of the channel. She fetched a breath of relief. A quarter of a mile farther on, she reached a clearing with a homestead set in the middle of it and here she made a deal with a drawling half-grown farmer boy to carry her in a spring-wagon behind a brisk team to a rendezvous already appointed—a flag-station of the railroad which crossed the river by a bridge some four miles below the point where she had so deftly effected her flight.

In the thriving small city of Paducah there was a man who discharged a unique and valuable civic duty. A jackal himself, he protected the community from other jackals. His name—for residential use—was Pitkins Bland, which happened to be his real name. For traveling purposes he had sometimes one name, sometimes another. The police in the big towns knew him as an accomplished and painstaking confidence man. His neighbors in his home town, wherein he rested between business trips hither and yon, knew him as a sedate and peaceful person of markedly domestic habits. He liked to work in his vegetable garden; he liked to loaf with the waterfronters down at Monkey-wrench Corner. Children—he was especially fond of children—generally called him "Uncle Pit." When he was flush they could depend on him for nickels to buy candy with.

As between him and the local constabulary, there prevailed a mutually beneficial arrangement. Whatever he

might do elsewhere, here he did nothing which a respectable taxpayer and a voter of the regular Democratic ticket might not with propriety do; for which reason he was treated as such. In return he personally saw to it that his fellow-citizens enjoyed immunity from the invasions of practitioners of Mr. Bland's profession and also from members of the kindred branches of that profession.

In his leisure hours he made a habit of meeting incoming trains. Occasionally from the cars would descend an alien whom he promptly buttonholed and engaged in whispered conversation. Whereupon the alien would climb right back on the cars and go thence. What Mr. Bland said to the passer-through was his own concern. The point was that the other invariably continued on his way unrejoicing.

This amiable gentleman chanced to be at the station when Number 6—mixed freight and passenger—arrived at 7:20 P.M., on the dot for once. Very much to his surprise the first traveler to emerge from the battered combination coach at the tail-end was Cap'n Tip January.

"Why, hello there!" exclaimed Mr. Bland. "I thought you was so prejudiced against railroads you wouldn't patronize 'em even if you had to walk. What's come over you to—"

He broke off, seeing now the look on the newcomer's face, seeing likewise that the steamboatman was accompanied by a young man of a flurried and downhearted aspect, this expression being paradoxically offset by the clashing tones in his wardrobe.

"Pit, wuz you down here when the local frum Princeton got in?" January's tone was brusk.

"Um huh, only she was behind time. Due at 5:18 but didn't get in until less than an hour ago. So after she left I got me a bite over at Buck Quarles' snack-stand and just stayed on for Number 6, me having a sort of hunch there might possibly be somebody on her I'd know. I didn't have any idea though it would be you."

"Did you see three people—two devilish Yankees and a—"

"I shorely did," stated Mr. Bland, anticipating the question. "Spotted 'em and held 'em up. The men are a couple of old-time mobsmen—shoddy ones, though; second-grade goods out of Chicago. They got dumped day before yesterday by Babe Clarkson of the Clarkson Circus down below the state line. That's what they said, and there wasn't any reason for 'em to be lying—not to me, anyway.

"But the gal, now; I didn't recognize her for a minute; then I placed her. She's a kind of new hand. At that, she's too good for the pair she's teamed up with. But, what I gathered, that's only temporary anyhow. She ran into 'em by chance yesterday or the day before, and being up against it for ready cash, she threw in with 'em till she can get back up North to where her kid is. Seems like she used to be on the stage with some little stock company or other and was going straight, by all accounts. But the claim is that she married some bum of a trouper that mistreated her and ditched her after he'd had a baby by her, and after that she turned reckless and went on the make. At least that's the story. I don't vouch for it. I'm just telling you the inside talk about her.

"Well, anyhow, I headed 'em off right here on this

platform and told 'em that if they maybe craved to turn some little trick around here there'd be absolutely nothing doing. But they said they were just passing through and in a hurry besides, and then asked me would I do 'em a small favor? They had some jack—I asked no questions but I guessed they'd just made a quick touch somewhere back in the sticks—and they wanted to tuck it away in a safe place—said they didn't want to have it on 'em if they got stuck here overnight. I couldn't see any harm in that so far as this town's concerned. They couldn't buy a money-order, which would have been their regular way, the post-office being closed. So, to help 'em out, I called up Jock Ogilvie of the Planters' Bank on the telephone from here at the depot, and on my say-so he came back down-town from his house and opened up and took the stuff on deposit. They aim to check it out later from Chi or somewhere, I judge, and split it three ways."

"Then they're still here—that's good!" snapped Cap'n January.

"Well, don't be too dead certain about that," said Mr. Bland. "They'd been hoping to make connections out of here with the train on the Northern division—you know, Number 11—but they missed her by a whisker; the transfer boat was already a hundred yards out from the incline. So then they wanted to know could they get across tonight anyway, and I told 'em probably not—that is, unless they could hire somebody with a skiff or something to set 'em over. I figure that must be their plan now, because, leaving me, they headed toward the city wharf. But say, Tip, look here!" Mr. Bland gave a little start. "What's your interest in this bunch?"

"Plenty! They had the gall to try their crookedness on my boat. Two of 'em made a fool out of this young feller here. Then on top of that one of 'em made a bigger fool out of me. After they'd got away separate—the men fust, then her—I began smellin' a rat and I cornered this boy"—again he indicated the crestfallen drummer—"and we kinder compared notes. To save time and on the chance they'd git together at the railroad, I jumped ashore at Gilbertsville, bringing him along with me, and we ketched the accommodation and, ez you see, trailed 'em in, clos't on their heels."

"Well, I'll swear!" lamented Mr. Bland sincerely and, with equal sincerity, did swear. "Why, Tip, if I'd guessed for one minute that that was the way it was—well, you know what I'd 'a' done! If there's any way I can help—"

"There is. You take this here boy with you and go find the county judge and have him issue an attachment tyin' up every red cent of that money that's in the Planters' Bank." Already he was moving off, with great swift strides. He threw his last words over his shoulder. "I'll try to handle the rest of this job my ownself."

CHAPTER XXV—*The Sanctified Buzz Saw*

THE fugitives were almost to Brookport, which is in Illinois although a great many otherwise well-informed people in Illinois may not know it even yet, when the motorboat failed them. It was not a motorboat; it was the motorboat. It was the first of its family to invade those waters—the forerunner of lively fleets and large flotillas. Nobody suspected the distressing truth then, but this was the pioneer and prototype of a class which eventually would cut deeply into the profits of legitimate steamcraft. That was a matter for the future, which no man may foretell. For the present here was a matter of crotchets and crankiness, locally regarded as being partly a marine curiosity and partly a common nuisance smelling of gasoline. She belonged to Riley Stegar and was the pride of his being. He, who dearly loved to tinker with diffident mechanisms, had once on a memorable time coaxed as many as three uninterrupted miles out of the Quickstep, for such was her ironic name, ere she coughed and died on him.

Prior to engaging the Quickstep, the spokesman for the strangers had sought to charter the ferry-boat Betty Owings, but Mr. Josh Flick, her engineer, had paused from his contemplation of the beauties of nature where he sat on the bow, enjoying an after-supper pipe, for long enough to state that she had finished her last trip

of current day and date, that the fires were banked and that he would see himself eternally consigned to a certain very tropical place before he stirred to unbank those fires. With a disdainful gesture he referred the anxious trio to Mr. Stegar, who in his private shipstead near the ferry dock, was oiling up his engine. Mr. Stegar had a passion for oiling up his engine whether it seemed to need oil or not. With him a trade was quickly struck. He delighted to meet landsmen who would take a sporting chance. And these hardy adventurers paid in advance, too.

It was Mr. Stegar who discovered that they were being followed. He lifted a solicitous nose out of the inner abdominal mysteries of his beloved, peered rearward along the wake and, pointing thither, remarked:

"Looks to me like yonder's somebody bustin' along in a skiff that's doin' their derndest to ketch up with us."

But his passengers were not deeply concerned by that. Mr. Stegar, whose eyesight was better than theirs, felt sure the distant skiff contained but a single occupant. Moreover, they were by now well beyond the dividing line between yellowish Ohio River water and bluish Tennessee River water, uniting but not yet commingled. So they figured themselves to be well on the safe side of complications, both nautically and legally speaking.

"Let 'im come, whoever 'tis," spoke up the cockeyed man who appeared to be the leader in this enterprise. "Swell chance he's got to overhaul us, huh?"

"W-e-ll, hardly," said Mr. Stegar, but he said it dubiously. Minutes before, his trained ear had caught the symptomatic sounds betokening lung trouble.

By affectionate nursing of the consumptive he man-

aged to stave off a complete breakdown until they were within fifty yards or so of the shore. Then, after a series of heartrending gasps and sputters, the breakdown came; and as the Quickstep drifted slowly, the pursuing boat emerged out of the retarded but now thickening twilight of a July night and overtook them. The man at its oars, having steered between them and the land, let go of those oars and, as he ranged alongside, stood up, and they knew him.

Bareheaded as he was and stripped to his shirt, he looked the part of a vengeful pirate. For a fact, he had behaved rather like a pirate—jumping into the first unchained skiff he saw at the wharf and whisking it away without asking anyone's leave.

"You folks will kindly turn back to where you jest come frum ez soon ez that there toy starts workin'," he stated with a cold politeness, stating it, though, as a thing about which there was no ground for argument.

"Is that so?" jeered Cock-Eye.

"Yes, I reckin that's so."

"Where's your warrant?"

"Ez it so happens, I've got two warrants," said Cap'n January, not boastingly but with assurance. "Here's one of 'em." He slightly elevated his half-clenched right hand. "And here's the other." He raised the left fist. "Want me to serve 'em on you? Or would you ruther go along nice and peaceable?"

"Is that so?" repeated Cock-Eye, while his own right began to steal back under the skirts of his coat toward his flank.

"Mister Man," said Cap'n January, with the utmost calmness as he stooped and reached to lay hold of the launch's gunwale, "whutever you got in that there

pocket of yours better be somethin' good to eat, because ef ever you draw it I'm shorely goin' to make you swallow it whole."

Cock-Eye changed his mind. His good angel had urged him to change it, which perhaps was just as well.

"You can't bluff me," he said; but it was a lie. He already was bluffed.

He of the soiled waistcoat took up the burden of debate. Dirty Vest was wise in the criminal law.

"You can't touch us nor stop us neither," he proclaimed. "We're out of your jurisdiction, you poor hick! Ain't we more than half-way across? Hell, I'll say we're pretty near all the way across! You can't touch us, and if you had any sense you'd know it and drop this foolishness right here. Oh, we'll go back with you rather than have a jam, but you'll be the one that'll be sorry for it afterwards. How long will it take a good lawyer to get us out on a habeas corpus? About twenty minutes, that's all. And then where'll you be with a suit against you in federal court for false arrest of citizens of Illinois on Illinois waters? You can't fool with Uncle Sam—you'll pay, and pay big."

Dirty Vest now addressed the attentive Mr. Stegar: "We'll want you, friend, to prove that we were less than a hundred and fifty feet from our bank of this river when this long-legged rube pulled this stuff of detaining us against our wills."

"Alluz ready to oblige a customer," said Mr. Stegar, smiling gently as though at some good joke. "I'm perfectly willin' to testify to that very thing." He whirled the wheel. "By gee! I believe she's fixin' to take holt. Say, lady and gents, ain't this here the sweetest little bunch of machinery you ever did see!"

An hour later or thereabouts, Mr. Bland was addressing the trapped three, superimposing scraps of the argot of their trade upon the homely metaphors of his native clime. He was adding a personal commentary to what they just had heard with astoundment and chagrin from the lips of a hastily summoned attorney.

"Yep," he was saying, "it's like the mouthpiece tells you. He can't spring you out of this coop on a writ for a very good reason. The reason is that under the maritime regulations of the United States, Kentucky, having more frontage on the Ohio River than Illinois has got, controls to low-water mark on the Illinois side. So you were nabbed on Kentucky soil—water rather—and you're locked up now in a Kentucky hoosgow; and unless you do a quick job of squaring, you'll be facing a Kentucky jury and you can dope it for yourself what that'll mean; especially since you took it on yourselves to provide a witness who'd swear to that very point against you.

"Oh, he's a riverman, too, that Stegar is. He knows as well as January what the law is, and so he just sat back quiet and let you go ahead and manufacture more and yet more evidence against yourselves. These river people down here may look like a bunch of low-combed roosters to a couple of foxy birds like you think you are, but lemme tell you they're wise to their own particular game.

"At that, you're getting off soft. They call this man the Prayin' Mate now, but they didn't use to call him that. If you'd 'a' pulled this plant a few years back, before he turned pious and closed up his private cemetery, you'd probably 'a' taken your last living look at him through quite a lot of smoke. You've been mon-

keying with a sanctified buzz-saw, that's what you've been doing and you're lucky to be still breathing. Con it over, boes, con it over."

Mr. Bland beckoned to the young woman, and she, beaten and haggard, followed him down the corridor of the city lock-up, where for the time being the prisoners were being held, until the two were beyond earshot of her companions.

"I've got a message for you from a certain party that's a friend of mine," he told her.

"What friend—that mate I trimmed?"

"The same. There'll be no charge of any sort against you. You can beat it out of here tonight for where your kid is. Want to go?"

"Of course. But"—and she shrugged hopelessly—"but how can I? I've got exactly two dollars to my name. I was strapped and desperate or I wouldn't have ganged in with those dubs yonder."

"Wait a minute, sister. Trouble with you Molls is you jump at conclusions too quick. I've got something for you besides a message. He's sending you this." He put a small wad of bills in her hand. "Here's an even hundred bucks. He told me to tell you it was payment for something or other—said you'd understand and if you didn't, no matter."

He left her standing there in the dim of the barred aisle-way and she fumbling at her dividends, with a misted look in the old eyes of her young face.

CHAPTER XXVI—*A Plot Against Our Government*

AS I went aboard the City of Iuka II with my gun-case over my shoulder, I ran smack into a thing suggestive of a sort of raggle-taggle carnival. Gipsies were making free of the forecastle while the rousters led their stock aft and shoved their gay red-and-blue wagons back against the chocks. The women, in their garments of all the colors that you could think of off-hand, and their dark heads tied up in bandannas, were like Indian squaws only they lacked the Indian's trick of wearing jarring tones and yet, by the very act of wearing them, making them harmonious.

There was also an exceedingly large, fat, and untidy, tame Russian bear, having a ring in its nose and a bored look on its face such as practically all tame bears of whatsoever nationality seem to have on their faces. There were also many brown children. So, when going on up to the boiler-deck I met old Mr. Yarbro at the head of the forward companionway I remarked to him, who was first mate here, that we had a regular circus troupe swarming about down below.

"We shorely have," he agreed, "and we'll be in luck ef they don't steal this yaller dam packet right out frum under us before we git to Danville, which is the p'int they're headin' fur. Seems like about onc't in so often, fur no given reason, a gipsy gang jest must take 'em a steamboat ride. I reckin they git tired of

travelin' 'crost-country in the dust and mud all the time. Well, anybody would. So they come pilin' on and try to git the worth of their passage-money back out of whut they kin pack off with 'em. Better lock up that fusee of your'n in a safe place. I ain't pesterin' much about this crowd, though," added the ancient, and he shifted slightly on his plump legs. His tone, I thought, was vaguely troubled.

"Well, then, what is pestering you?" I asked.

"That feller yonder—he's the one." And Mr. Yarbro, better known among friends as Yaller Dam, made a covert gesture toward an inoffensive-looking youngish person who stood on the guards and watched the darkies bringing on freight as though this sight might be to him a novelty.

"Looks harmless enough," I commented. "What's he been doing?"

"It's whut he's fixin' to do that frets me and some others on this here boat. Wait till after we pull out —we'll be gittin' away in a minute or so now—and I'll tell you about him without somebody else tells you fust."

Shortly then we did pull out, it being a raw November forenoon and we moving under lowery skies off and up into the blue waters of the Tennessee; but today, because of the weather, that gun-metal blue showed a dull slaty cast, so that with us it was like entering upon a river of tarnished pewter. Also the air had quite a winterish taste to it, as though the first snow of the season might be coming along weeks ahead of its proper time. In this was a promise to me of much shooting on above. Even with all those sawmills at the upper end of town so close by, broken flocks

of wild fowl were rising out of the willows and flittering to and fro across our pathway. Where I was going the ducks ought to be good and plentiful.

Feeling well content with these prospects, I dropped the stateroom key into a deep pocket and went on a tour of exploration to discover how many oldsters besides Mr. Yarbro were left to man this craft. Few enough were, I found. I recognized Mr. Pluck Sebree, although his memorable goatee of a prevalent gamboge tint had turned to a whitewash brush, and his once jaunty pins now creaked under him; but his associate in the pilot-house was a new one on me—strange face and strange name, too.

On the other hand, the senior engineer, Mr. Jobes, had changed little during the years since our last meeting. The face of this veteran, as seen through a smoky haze where he plied with his oil-can and swabbed with his cotton waste, seemed somewhat greasier than of yore, that was all. Which was understandable. His wrinkles having increased and deepened would naturally hold more grease. And Captain Billy Lockwood still was a wide-awake captain as he had been when he was captain of the original City of Iuka, and before that of the long since defunct Emma Katie Lucas, and before that of boats whose names, if repeated, would mean nothing to me.

With Mr. Sebree and Mr. Yarbro where they confabbed together outside the main cabin, I encountered a third patriarch in the person of old Captain Tommy Thomasson, a mariner notable in days long past as a romancer—I recalled him and his fame at once—and still spry enough despite his age. It seemed he was bound for Clifton as a guest, which meant he would

insist on standing a trick at the wheel and would bunk in the texas with the crew and in general would comport himself as a member of the same. He looked the draped embodiment of a folk-lore tale, what with his great white head and a handsome blanket of English broadcloth, which he wore instead of an overcoat.

Approaching, I observed these three had about them the air of plotters. They spoke in undertones with side glances at a fourth individual, and this one I saw was he who half an hour before had been pointed out as one giving concern to certain persons among us. Beyond doubt a mystery throve here.

For me the mystery was made deeper by Mr. Yarbro's first cryptic words.

"Son," he asked, "air you or air you not a purty fair liar, ez liars go?"

"Well," I told him, "I've been in the newspaper business most of my life. And now I'm trying to make a living writing fiction."

"That oughter qualify mouty nigh anybody," he conceded. "Still, I reckin we'd better leave the biggest part of the job to more experienced heads. But you mebbe kin help out some when the right time comes. It'll sound better, anyhow, comin' frum an outsider, so to speak. So, son, when I give you the wink—like this—you fetch up the subject—in a sort of a casual way—of mules."

"Mules? Whose mules?"

"Jest mules. Anybody's mule 'll do."

"But why mules?"

"That'll be made manifest to yore understandin' in due time. Then, as to the matter of the deer horns—but no, I jedge 'twould be better to git some other pas-

senger to bring them up. It's smarter to sort of spread the play around. I've got my mind on a likely candidate now."

"Did you say deer horns?"

"None other than which, son." He addressed his co-conspirators: "You boys better tell him the insides of the facts so he won't be left in plum' ign'ence, whilst I'm 'tendin' to them little special arrangements down below—you know?"

He waddled away and Mr. Sebree took on the burden of exposition: "That young feller yonder—name of Hedges, Walter K. Hedges—well, he's one of these here deputy U. S. marshals. Brand-new one he is, too. They transferred him or something down this way from Louieville only last week, so he told me a little while ago. It's what else he's told me that's got us all fretting. Because unless something providential happens to detain him, he's traveling with us to Webb's Wood-Yard and the minute he gets there he's going to slap a libel onto little Jeff D. Ledger's towboat, the Suwanee Maid. Maybe you remember little Jeff D. Ledger?"

On thought, I did. I seem to recall that a certain Master Jefferson Davis Ledger, stocky and red-headed and freckle-faced, had been in the third grade at the old First Ward School when I sat in the fourth grade, and that his people had been steamboat people as divers of mine were. I said as much, and Mr. Sebree and Captain Thomasson like a pair of solemn mandarins nodded in grave assent.

"The very identical one," stated Mr. Sebree, "and a dog-gone clever, hard-working boy, too. Well, after his father died—Dave Ledger that used to run head clerk on the old Fleetwing—he buckled to and took

care of his mother, and the first thing you know, before he was thirty, he got to be foreman of McNaught's Marine Ways. And he saved his money till here about eight months ago he had a chance to buy that little towboat, part for cash down and part notes. So he up and bought her, and a bargain at the price she was. But right off he had hard luck with her. About the second trip she made she broke her shaft, and getting her put back in shape left him deeper in the hole than ever. Then the dull season came along and hit us—low water and all—and I doubt if she cleared a cent for him all summer. I don't know how long she was tied up back yonder behind us in the mouth of Island Creek.

"Then, all of a sudden—here only last week it was—it looked like his luck switched around. He got a nice contract to move a big tow for the Dyer-Earl cross-tie people—that big Northern concern that's operating down here now—and it was dead certain that if he handled that job in good shape—which he would—they'd keep him busy all winter on account of them being short-handed. Both of their own boats got all ripped up in that bad cyclone we had eight weeks ago.

"So Jeff, he dusted round and saw all his creditors and asked for a little more time, because as he told 'em—and it was the truth—a couple of months with things breaking right ought to put him on velvet. Why, just this first job would go a mighty long way toward pulling him out of debt. It means everything in the world to him, just about, because it's an open secret that as soon as he's on his feet he's hoping to get married to one of the nicest, finest little girls along this whole river—little Fannie Ingram, up at Brownsport.

"They've been engaged for going on two years, with

her waiting and him hustling. But he'd never in this world take him a wife till he's in shape to take care of one, not being built that way. So you can see for yourself what this thing means, not only to him and his mother and his well-wishers but to somebody else."

I could see. As who couldn't? Partly by virtue of Mr. Sebree's earnestness and partly by virtue of my own imagination I got the picture of it. It was rather an appealing picture.

"Well, here's where the big hitch comes," Mr. Sebree was continuing, his chin-whisker waggling in the sincerity of his mounting disgust. "Along with the others that he's in debt to, Jeff goes to see old J. Henry Garbolt. J. Henry Garbolt's the one that he owes a heavy bill to for repairs, and Garbolt's been pressing him night and day for a settlement. And that old Shylock, that everybody knows he would skin a louse for its hide and tallow, he listens and lets on like he's agreeable to the idea of giving the boy another show to get his head above water. And then what does he do—the blamed shriveled-up, gander-necked old bloodsucker?

"Why, yistiddy evening he slips down to the custom house and files his derned claim. So there's nothing else for the clerk to do except to start this deputy on up the river today with orders to seize the Suwanee Maid and tie her up unless at the last minute Jeff Ledger should be able to produce the full amount that's due along with the back interest and the federal court costs and all, or else furnish bond on the spot. And there's about as much hope of either one as there is for J. Henry Garbolt, Esquire, to need his heavy underwear in the place where he'll go after he leaves here!"

"Jest about," assented Cap'n Thomasson.

"Ain't it a sweet idea?" went on Mr. Sebree, his indignation increasing by the moment. "'Sif 'twasn't hard enough already for a steamboatman to make a living in these waters, what with the railroads building in nearly everywhere and these pesky motorboats dodging back and forth thicker than fleas, ready to cut rates for short hauls or do any odd jobs, and now with motor-trucks beginning to carry tons and tons of stuff that used always to go by boat! But that's how she stands, this particular case anyhow. Here's Jeff Ledger and him all unsuspicious, expecting to pull out from Webb's before dark this very night with those bargeloads of cross-ties that've been piling up on the bank there all fall.

"Once he got headed down the river he'd be out of danger—they'd never in this world grab a boat in midstream and her shoving a tow in front of her besides; and as quick as he pushed through to Cairo and delivered his load he'd have ready money in his pocket—enough to pay off this big claim and maybe some of the little ones. And there's old J. Henry knowing all this and knowing also that as soon as the Maid's libeled Jeff's eternally licked, because she'll be put up for sale by the government and somebody, meaning old J. Henry himself, will bid in a mighty sweet little piece of steamboating property for about one-third what she's worth. That's what he's figuring on, you can bet your last two bits on that.

"And yonder's that deputy with his badge on his vest and the papers in his pocket. And no earthly way to warn Jeff of what's afoot until we pull into Webb's, and it'll be too late then because the deputy'll go ashore about as soon as anybody else unless—well, unless a

few of us can club in some way, somehow, and save the day without getting ourselves into trouble with Uncle Sam."

I began to see the light—a thin, pale rift through an encompassing murkiness. But the shadows still were thick and puzzling. Nevertheless I decided to enlist in the dark, as it were.

"Here's one volunteer, if there's anything I can do," I said.

"Don't worry, you're already signed up." Captain Thomasson said that. But Mr. Sebree said:

"*S-h,* look! The pot's already starting to boil, boys."

He pointed, and we beheld Mr. Yarbro's vastness rising into view as he labored up the stairs from below. He screwed his face into a meaning grimace as he passed us, and crossing the fore-deck he engaged Deputy Marshal Hedges in conversation where the latter still lingered at the forward railing, we three, after a moment or two, following on behind.

"So you ain't acquainted with this here Tennessee River then?" we heard Mr. Yarbro saying.

"Nor with any other big river, very much," confessed Mr. Hedges. "I was born and raised in the Blue Grass country. It's interesting to me, the way they do things on a steamboat down here."

"I'm past seventy and I ain't never got tired of it yit," stated Mr. Yarbro, and there, at least, we knew he spoke the truth.

"What time did you tell me we ought to get to this place—Webb's?"

"I didn't even try to tell you."

"Well, somebody was saying that it ought to be about—"

"Then somebody shot his mouth off too previous. At this stage of water and with special calls to make —somebody's liable to give us a hail anywheres along the banks—there ain't no tellin' when we'll git to any place. We mout be on time or an hour behind time or two hours, even; it all depends. Say, I'll tell you whut!" Mr. Yarbro's tone would indicate that a bright idea just had hurtled into his brain. "See that there big box right down there? Well, you jest keep your eye on that box and when the niggers shift it, gittin' ready to tote it off, why that'll be kind of an advisin' notice to you."

I looked where Mr. Yarbro's round forefinger aimed and was aware that in these past few minutes a large packing-case had appeared on the forecastle. Part of a thriving gipsy family had been dispossessed to provide space for it. It bore on an upper surface in heavy capitals the inscription: "J. J. Bostwick, Webb's Wood-Yard, Ky." To me, peering down from above, it appeared that the lampblack with which the lettering had been done was still fresh, in fact, still damp.

"One of our hole cards," Mr. Sebree advised me in a cautious whisper, his assumption being that I knew the terminology of stud-poker. I did know. "It's not such a very strong one but we had to think fast and work fast. We're hoping we've got a real ace buried, though, in case we need it."

"Sort of cold outdoors, ain't it?" that fat intriguer, Mr. Yarbro, was saying next. "S'pose we git inside out of this yaller dam wind? There's some folks aboard I'd like fur you to meet." With apparent surprise he noted our eavesdropping proximity: "Why, here's no less'n three of 'em now."

Chapter XXVII—*Liars All*

INTRODUCTIONS being over, we trailed the two to the men's cabin and to the blushing-hot stove which made of it a comforting place. As we disposed ourselves about the stove, I caught Mr. Yarbro's words while he poured them in a confidential rumble into the greenhorn's ear: "Mebbe afterwhile we kin git old Tommy Thomasson started off—beatin'est one fur yarnin' you ever did see. Mebbe he won't and mebbe he will; he's got to be in the notion fur it. We'll have to wait till the sperrit moves him. Besides, Cap'n Lockwood don't hold much with that kind of thing. He's strong fur stickin' to the cold truth. He's shorely funny that way, Bill Lockwood is."

Time passed, and nothing especially happened except that divers persons joined our little circle. The prevalent conversation was tame and slow and mainly technical, dealing intricately and prolongedly with the whims of waterways, the faults of some stern-wheelers and the virtues of others, the proneness of channels to alter without provocation or prior warning. The heat set me to yawning and nodding—that plus this disappointing dulness. Fully an hour went by, dragging. I must have drowsed. What brought me back to wakefulness was a sense of nervous movement on the part of Mr. Hedges, who sat alongside me. I figured that having been promised entertainment and not getting it, the young gentleman was growing restive. He made as

though to rise, and at that Mr. Yarbro flashed his winked signal to me across the other's shoulders. Without muffing or fumbling, I took the cue instantly; but then, mentally I had been rehearsing my part.

"I notice," I said, "that that caravan down below haven't got any mules—only horses. I wonder why it is you so rarely do see any mules with a gipsy outfit even in a mule-breeding section such as this is?"

"Speakin' of mules, now, there're some mighty curious things about mules," stated Capt. Thomasson, and I saw with a measure of relief how Mr. Hedges, no longer looking bored but with alertness writ large upon an ingenuous face, was settling back again into his chair.

"Man and boy," said Capt. Thomasson, "I've been givin' mules a right smart study fur the most part of my life. There's things about mules you wouldn't suspect ef you didn't know your topic. F'rinstance, now, a mule's got a lot of sense when it comes to takin' keer of himself. Onc't a hoss takes a fool notion to git skeered, he'll skeer at anything or nothin' at all, and a crazy hoss is ez prone to run into a solid wall and kill himself ez he is to kill off some innocent bystander. No jedgment, no calculation, no forethought. A mule's different.

"Who ever heard of a runaway mule hurtin' himself? Nobody, that's who. He'll mebbe cripple up somebody else—but himself? No, suhree! And there's a good reason fur ever'thing a mule does. It might not be a satisfactory reason to you or me but 'tis to him. Youbetcher! He's actually gifted that way. I claim it's the Lawd's way of tryin' to make it up to a mule fur not havin' any family pride behind him nor

any family prospects ahead of him, ez the feller says. The biggest trouble with a mule is, though, that about onc't in so often he will let his imagination run away with him. That's his most principal drawback—too much imagination. You'd prob'ly never guess it to look at him, but, gentlemen, it's there every pop."

"Aw, shuckin's, Tommy, you're foolin'!" put in Mr. Larkin, the second engineer. "A dumb thing like a mule is couldn't have any real imagination."

"Couldn't he, though? Listen, gentlemen, I'll prove it right out of my own experience. When I was a boy, on away up beyond here in Hardin County, I had an old uncle and this here uncle he had one of the likeliest two-year-old mules you ever did see—mouse-colored with black points. Well, summer come along and my uncle turned that mule out to graze in a six-acre field. Right in the middle of the lot was a log crib full of pop-corn. My uncle grew a big chance of pop-corn in the year before, but the bottom fell out of the pop-corn market, so he was aimin' to hold his crop over fur the next season. So he had I don't know how many thousand bushels stored away fur future reference in that there old crib.

"Well, gentlemen, that particular summer was the hottest summer in the history of this whole valley—the hottest and the driest. Frum the tenth day of May on, not a single drop of rain fell. The sun just blazed down all day long. Fur six weeks stiddy without a break, the weather got hotter every day that passed. The grass dried up and turned to tinder and blew 'way. The leaves burnt right off the trees. The shingles on the roof of that log crib curled up tighter and tighter till finally they just charred off and left the crib without

a top on it. The thermometer never got down below ninety, day or night.

"Well, the sixteenth day of July was the hottest day of 'em all—one hundred and fourteen in the shade it was, before milkin' time that mornin'. About ten o'clock the heat set fire to whut was left of that crib. Seemed like those log walls jest busted out blazin' in about a dozen places at onc't—spontaneous combustin', that's really whut it was. Of course the flames started the pop-corn to poppin'. It popped up in clouds—millions and millions of big white grains—and it fell till 'twas eight inches deep on a level all over the pasture lot. And that poor bewildered mule, full of imagination like he was, he mistook that there pop-corn fur a heavy snowstorm and, gentlemen, he jest natchelly laid down in it and froze to death. When they found him he was stiff ez a board and before they could skin him they had to—"

The laughter rose then in an appreciative roar, and none roared with more delight than did Mr. Hedges. But I observed that Captain Lockwood alone out of all our assembled company had not laughed. While the happy clamor died away to gurgles and grunts and little groaning sounds the skipper cast a glance of seeming displeasure upon the aged fabulist, chuckling there over the successful reception his gorgeous unveracity had earned.

Again the talk was resumed generally. Again and shortly it grew monotonous, tiresome, and again after a while Mr. Hedges began to show restlessness. Having had a taste of plum-cake, porridge was flat to his palate; you might put it that way. So then a member of our group who was a stranger to me but who looked

as though he might be a small planter homeward bound from the city, spoke up:

"Say, Yaller, what ever became of those big deer horns you fellows used to have hung up between your smoke-stacks?"

"You'll have to ask Billy Lockwood here about them. He's the responsible party."

"That so, captain?" The curious one had turned to the master, sitting across the ring from him.

"Yes, I s'pose so," answered the other shortly. It would appear he did not find the topic congenial.

"Well, what's the reason for taking 'em down?"

"Oh, never mind." The skipper's manner was reluctant.

"But there must have been a reason?" This inquisitive person surely was persistent.

"Go on, Billy, and tell him why," put in Mr. Yarbro.

"I wish you would, captain." This petition came from our up-state innocent. He had quit stirring about in his seat. His air was intent. Plainly, this cross-firing whetted his appetite.

"Oh, well then, I reckin I might as well," said Captain Lockwood, still half-begrudgingly. "Mind you, though, I've got to stick to cold facts. I'm no fancy exaggerator like this old scoundrel here." With a convincing touch of his earlier disapproval he indicated the mendacious Mr. Thomasson, and that happy falsifier ducked his head to hide a guilty grin.

"I suppose some people would call it foolish prejudice on my part." He was directly addressing himself now to the attentive Mr. Hedges. "They might even call it superstition. I only trust you'll understand, suh, why I've got feelings against all deer prongs whatso-

ever, after I've told you the story, such as it is. I'm looking to you to appreciate why I specially never did like the sight of those old gilt stag horns that came originally off the Emma Katie Lucas after she burned up that time. Commodore Shep Withers, the head of this line, transferred 'em to the first City of Iuka although I argued with him against it, and when the old Iuka sank at Swallow Bluffs five years ago and was a total loss, nothing would do him but he must salvage 'em once more and swing 'em between the chimneys of this boat as soon as she was finished. So I had to go on seein' 'em every day and walking under 'em every day and it certainly did fret me!

"But he died, and Shep Junior, who's owning the fleet now, is more reasonable. Finally I got him to take the blamed things down and let me chop 'em up with a fire-ax and throw away the pieces. I'm saying all this to you, suh, at the beginning because you look to me like a sensible man."

Being thus flattered, Mr. Hedges could do no less than nod sympathetically. Whereupon Captain Lockwood, with no further preamble, proceeded:

"Some of these men here know that I was born and brought up in the mountains at the other end of this state. They still have their share of feuds up there in the sticks, but in my day they had even more of 'em. Now, my own folks were mixed up in a feud, too—with a family named Bloodgood and their connections that mainly lived over the line from us on the West Virginia side.

"It was one of these old drawn-out feuds—it dated back to my grand-daddy's time, and all these years it had been going along, going along, with bushwhack-

ings and fence-corner gunnery and now and then, when both sides were lined up, a regular pitched battle out in the open. I'm telling you we didn't raise much else in those mountains but hell and orphans. We didn't have time for much else.

"Well, of all my brothers and sisters I was the oldest one. So naturally, when I came along it was expected that I'd carry on the family inheritance, my father being the head of the clan, sort of, seeing that most of the men of his generation had been killed off or crippled up. After all these years I can talk without much heat about that trouble, but there was a time when it was the most serious thing in my life. You see how that could be, don't you, suh?"

This time the enthralled deputy's nod was even more vigorous than before.

"Let's see, where was I?—oh yes, well, when I was about seventeen years old, something happened. A backwoods missionary came in among us from somewhere back in the knobs. Lawdy, what a strong and stirring exhorter that old preacher-man was! Why, suh, he was like a prophet who'd stepped right out from between the pages of the Old Testament. He didn't belong to any particular creed either—his gospel was brotherly love, that's all.

"Well, he'd turn in and work on those Bloodgoods a spell and then he'd work awhile on us Lockwoods and —well, to make a long story a little bit shorter, he finally got both crowds to the point where they were ready to let bygones be bygones and take the pledge to quit warring with one another. Single-handed, that saintly old man had succeeded where the courts and the neighbors and all had been failing for God knows how long!

"It was agreed that on a certain Sunday morning in the month of June the whole Bloodgood connection should come marching across the line and meet our people at a little log church that stood in our cove right close by my father's big double-log cabin. And our people would meet 'em there and each bunch would stack arms in token of friendship and clasp hands with the other bunch and take their solemn oath to bury the quarrel; and then there'd be a prayer-meeting and a praise-service, and after that everybody would sit down together, Bloodgoods and Lockwoods all mixed in, and eat a big basket dinner that the women-folks had fixed up. I claim that probably none of you-all here ever saw a greater sight in your life—with that old man shouting his halleluiahs till you could hear him up a mile away.

"Up to a certain point—and I'm coming pretty soon to that point—the plan was carried out according to schedule. The biggest moment of it all came to pass when my father, as the head of the Lockwoods, walked out to meet old man Cas Bloodgood in a little cleared place between the two crowds. When they were right close up together my father laid down his loaded squirrel rifle, and old Cas laid down his, and they got ready to shake hands.

"But just before they got to that part of it, my dad turned to me and he pointed to where his rifle was laying there on the ground and he says to me, he says: 'Son, I've done fired my last shot in anger against a Bloodgood. Pick up that rifle of mine and take it in the house and hang it up against the chimney-piece and there let it stay forevermore, amen!' he says.

"So I picked it up and did just like he said. I

walked into the cabin and I hung it up above the slab mantel on a set of deer horns that had been there ever since I could remember. It was where dad always kept his rifle when he wasn't out hunting or gunning for human game. And then—believe or not, gentlemen, but it's the sober truth—then as I turned my back to start on out, one of those horns fetched loose from the cranny and fell down and the rifle fell with it and hit the floor, hammer first, and went off and the whole charge went through an open window and shot old man Cas Bloodgood's wool hat right off his head just as he stepped back after shaking hands with dad!

"So with that the Bloodgoods naturally jumped at the notion that there'd been rank dirty treachery, and they grabbed for their stacked weapons, and our side grabbed for theirs, and when the fight was over they'd retreated, and there were three dead men and seven wounded ones scattered around, and I was on my way afoot out of that high-country for good and all, because I knew that the Bloodgoods would be laying for me, world without end, and moreover and furthermore, I knew that I'd never be able to explain even to my own folks that it all was a pure accident. And to this day I've never been back either. So, as I said before, you can see for yourself why from that hour to this I've hated the very sight of deer horns."

"I can," murmured the fascinated Mr. Hedges. "I certainly can." From others there came also such murmurs.

CHAPTER XXVIII—*Sweet Tooth*

IT'S so temptingly easy, reciting a moving chronicle, to be anticlimactic. At least it was so with Captain Lockwood. As though his vanity over holding the center of the stage had temporarily upset his proved sense of narrative values, he now would hark back and dwell heavily and tediously on this point or that, duplicating his words, recapitulating, piling up unnecessary detail.

As he droned on I realized that the packet was slowing down, was in fact rounding to as though for a landing. I harkened subconsciously for the blast from her whistles which would notify us she meant to land. None followed, though her speed, as I could feel, grew less and less. A like premonition must have come also to our young man, for he stood up, saying, with a slightly anxious air, something about stepping out on the guards.

Minor things promptly ensued. Out of the tail of my eye, I perceived that Mr. Larkin, with some stealth and much celerity, was vanishing through the forward cabin-door; that Mr. Yarbro, with fatuous remarks was buttonholing Mr. Hedges, seeking to detain him against his will; that Captain Lockwood, having simultaneously risen, was right at his elbow repeating a descriptive phrase which previously to my own knowledge, he had employed at least thrice.

And next, almost immediately, with a great clattering of his feet, a great waving of his arms, Mr. Larkin

had returned to us and was shouting out most disturbing news:

"Great God Almighty!" he was yelling. "That bear down below—that big bear! It's runnin' wild! It's on the rampage! It's chasin' one of them gipsy boys like it's aimin' to eat him up! Come quick, everybody!"

He swung about, lunged through the open door and clattered, still uttering his alarm, into the mouth of the forward companionway, and we, to the last man, surging and jostling behind him.

As we bumped against him where he halted half-way down those steps, the flanking bulkheads cut off our vision except slantingly below and due ahead. But from behind us and beneath, there arose a tumult, already loud and by the instant growing louder—startled oaths, shrill screams from women and children, neighing of panicky horses, whoops as of dire terror from rousters, the thud of scurrying feet and, most pregnant of all, a circulating sound which part was whine and part was growl and part was squeal, and altogether was the voice of some large mammal laboring under intense emotion or intense desire. It was a Noah's-Ark-at-feeding-time sound, a thrillingly carnivorous sound, a lost-in-the-jungle-at-midnight sound. It was a sound traveling nearer and nearer. It was upon us!

Across our circumscribed vista there passed very rapidly—indeed so rapidly the eye scarce could transmit the details of it to the brain before it was gone—the following procession in the following order, namely:

First: a small, dark, gipsy boy, his elbows pressed to his ribs, his swift feet spurning the planks of the deck, and he casting wildly imploring glances over his shoulder and screeching as he fled.

Second: a shaggy roly-poly Russian bear traveling at top speed, with a twitching, ringed snout and a pair of gaped, greedy, and vociferous jaws not three feet from the whisking tails of the little fugitive's raggedy coat—piggy, hungry eyes aflame, long neck craned, uncurried mane standing on end, frenzied nostrils open, shoulders wallowing flatly under the loose thick pelt, long, deadly teeth bared, huge claws rattling against the rough boards, slaver dripping from the fearsome jowls, red tongue protruding—a most portentous and terrifying spectacle.

Third: a male adult gipsy, who made futile strokes with a long staff at those billowy hairy buttocks, and impotent clutches at the whipping tether of his beast, and who constantly was uttering vain commands in a strange tongue which presumably the brute in its calmer hours would comprehend and perchance obey.

What to be done? How to go about doing it? In a moment like this even the hardy soul shrinks from the issue, growing for the moment irresolute. We huddled there in a close formation, hampering and retarding one another while the panorama flashed by. And we continued to hesitate while the traveling uproar went aft, came forward again, darted past again like a strip of runaway moving-picture film, and proceeded for the second time rearward.

And now Mr. Jobes in his lubricated overalls ran out beyond the overhang to call up to us that the bear had chased its prey into the storeroom behind the engines, that the heroic trainer had gone in behind the ravening monster, that all three of them were in there now and the hullabalooing something frightful—or words to that general intent.

So we rallied our wills and in a body pelted down to the deck and collectively went as reenforcements, catching up such improvised weapons as shovels and rake-bars from alongside the furnaces. But we lacked for competent leadership; so our rescue work was awkward and delayed and, as it turned out, unnecessary.

For as still we milled about at the mouth of that dark recess from which issued noises seemingly denoting a life-and-death struggle, those noises died away all so suddenly and magically, to whimperings and pants and now, behold, there came forth the boy and the bear and the man; and the boy miraculously seemed unhurt although woefully tousled, and the bear plainly was subdued to his customary docility, and the man triumphantly waved his long club aloft and jerked at the end of his recaptured chain-leash in token of regained mastery over a lately rebellious pet.

He received our congratulations without comment; he merely shrugged when we praised his gallantry and and asked him how, in so short a space of time, he had saved the lad intact and had driven that roused ferocity out of the beast and subjugated it anew. But then the truly brave were ever the truly modest.

It must have been all of half an hour before the aftermath of confusion finally abated, and I got a nudge in the short-ribs from Mr. Yarbro's blunt thumb.

"Looky yonder!" he bade me, and he was very jubilant about it. "Looky yonderways at that poor deluded young friend of our'n still keepin' his weather eye on that old packin'-case that we rigged up fur him. From present prospects there ain't no tellin' how much longer he'll go on bein' deceived. Well, the longer the better, ain't that so?"

I agreed with him heartily that such was so. "But," I added, "but eventually he's going to start wondering why it's taking us so long to travel a matter of nineteen miles or so from where we started. What's going to happen then?"

"Why, he's goin' to begin astin' questions, that's whut. And then some member of the crew—me, prob'ly or mebbe Billy Lockwood—will be deeply pained to have to tell it to him that by reason of the terrifical excitement prevailin' at the time, owin' to that zoological exhibition which wuz goin' on, we actually pulled into Webb's and pulled out ag'in without anybody rememberin' that him and that box wuz both organized to go ashore there. He can't question that part of it: I'll bet you even didn't notice that we made the landin' and you in on the secret at that. Well, it wuz a powerful quick landin'—I'll say that fur it—jest long enough fur the mud-clerk to hop off onto the Suwanee Maid and pass the word to Jeff D. Ledger and hop back on. Well, then after that there'll be some more sad news that'll have to be broke to him. I'll tell him—purvided it's me that's doin' the explainin' and apologizin' and so forth—that we'll be obliged to tote him on up ez fur ez the Star Lime Works and drop him off there and let him hire a rig and work his way back. But that'll take him till plum' nightfall, ef he does it by then, and long before then Jeff Ledger'll have his towboat walkin' down this river arm in arm with all them cross-ties. I wouldn't be surprised but whut he's already gone. Oh, son, ain't Billy Lockwood the smartest liar ever you met up with in your whole yaller dam life? Him and his feuds! And him a real web-foot that don't know no more about mountains than whut leedle a fel-

ler kin learn by lookin' up at 'em from the Chattanoogy wharf!"

"The captain is truly a beautiful and accomplished liar and I envy him," I conceded, "but I think, if I were deciding, I'd have to hand first prize to the bear. There's a truly great actor for you."

"Who—him? Why, son, that there bear wuzn't actin'—he wuz in earnest ef ever a bear wuz. You tempt a bear's sweet tooth—even ef it's a bear like this here one that wouldn't hurt a fly—and there ain't no stoppin' him till his appetite's satisfied. Anybody'll tell you that."

"I don't quite understand," I said. "What has the bear's sweet tooth got to do with it? I figured you-all hired the boy to tease the bear until—"

"Wall, I'll be yaller dam! Ain't nobody told you yit? Why, it wuz the best little idee of 'em all—smearin' all that there molasses onto the seat of the boy's pants and givin' the bear one good sniff at it and one good sniff of it and then givin' the boy a ten-foot lead—say, son, that reminds me: you owe two dollars fur your contribution. There wuz five of us chipped into the pot. The boy worked fur nothin' and the bear's done had his reward, havin' licked the boy's pants behind, but we had to hand the boy's daddy—he's the one that owns the bear—ten dollars cash down in advance. Better gimme your sheer now before I furgit it."

In the course of my entire life I do not recall any occasion when I surrendered two dollars with a better grace.

CHAPTER XXIX—*Hell and High Water*

FORETELLING the future is, for the run of us, a mighty chancy business. Old Mr. Jericho Haley did not find it so. He throve on it. After he retired from active pursuits, having been in his day a ship-carpenter and a good one, it was about the only business he followed. If it brought in no cash it did bring him fame.

Especially on the pessimistic side, this Mr. Haley was a wiseacre not without honor in his own country. His large bulbous nose, jutting forth above the whisker-line like a seamed boulder rising out of dense under-growth, was a great nose for smelling bad news before it happened.

For no guessing how long, his appraising eye had been studying the vagaries of an interlinked system of capricious and restless watercourses; and at length it came to be that practically all our steamboatmen, who were a clannish breed and are yet—such of them as have survived—learned to lean heavily upon his words of augury and be governed accordingly. Taking pride in him as a local institution, they pointed to various autumnal prognostications by him touching on hard winters and to sundry springtime prognostications of abnormally low stages during the ensuing summers, and so forth and so on, all of which, to hear them tell about it, had been justified.

But his greatest triumph was achieved in the Year of the Big High Water. On the Mississippi or the Missouri or the Ohio or on any of the main tributaries of any of these, you get to think of a notable flood, after it has passed, in terms of capital letters.

As early as the second week in March, Mr. Haley stood forth at Monkeywrench Corner and, like another Father Noah, made direful prediction to the people. He predicted the greatest rise in civilized history as recorded there and thereabouts. There were no reservations, no ifs or ands or buts about it. He came right out and said it.

For once even his stoutest supporters were shaken; they were a disputatious lot anyhow, those mariners who gathered daily at the old boat store. They might band together against presumptuous outside opinion, and generally did; but among themselves they reserved the right of taking issue on technical matters. Besides, they hoped he was wrong. Naturally, they would hope that, being men whose continuing wages were contingent upon uninterrupted navigation. So questions were raised first by this one and then by that one.

"Not as tall a rise as the '84 rise, shorely?" dissented Captain Saul Rollings, who himself was no mean hand at a forecast.

"She'll beat old 1884. She won't beat her much, but she'll beat her by a nice leedle margin."

"But that'd put practically this whole city under water except a few ridges here and there."

"Exactly whut I'm lookin' fur. So git ready now whilst you've got plenty of warnin'."

"But in '84, the peak came in February on top of sudden big thaws up above. And here 'tis, mighty

near the middle of March and not any really serious signs yet. Looks like to me it's too late, what with springtime, as you might say, peeping over the hill-tops." This was a contribution from that chronic skeptic, Mr. Joe Birdnetter. "Of course we're going to have a considerable freshet; that's indicated all right. But, for one, I'm not expecting anything as bad as like you let on, Jericho."

"The Mississip' is risin'. She's due to keep on risin' till further notice. The Ohio is risin' and she ain't goin' to stop, whut with a million billion tons of melted snow and melted ice pourin' down out of the Head of the Hollow." Mr. Haley was ticking off his points on the ends of his gnarled fingers. "Inside of ten days frum now there'll be more water tryin' to git out of the side-streams in this lower valley than ever you seen before in all your born days. Well, with the main rivers risin' and pushin' it back, instid of lettin' it out, where's all that there crest of water goin' to go to? I'll tell you where it's goin' to go to: It's goin' to shove back and drownd out the land, low ground and high ground ez well, in a way sich ez you ain't beheld 'round these parts sence the whites crowded out the Injuns."

Mr. Haley rose up from his seat and straightened himself and threw down a most terrific challenge: "You-all know whut my reppitation is fur figgerin' out trouble in advance? You-all know how much store I set on that there reppitation. You-all know I ain't rarely or never called the turn wrong. Well then, hear me and heed me and go forth, ef so-minded, and spread the tidin's. Tell everybody you meet that I'm stakin' my perfessional reppitation on bein' right this time.

I stand by it and I'm willin' to run the risk of fallin' by it. Less than one month frum now I'll be branded ez the biggest liar at the mouth of the Tennessee or else you'll be comin' to me—yas, comin' in skiffs, because it'll be deep fur wadin' in rubber boots down in that lower part of town where I live at—comin' to beg my pardon fur havin' ever doubted me. Gentlemen, I bid you good mawnin'."

From the doorway he threw back his parting advices:

"Jest set and watch her—that's all I'm astin' you-all to do. But don't set too long. Build yourselves a few john-boats fur gittin' 'round in, ef you don't crave fur April Fools' Day to ketch you with both feet wet."

He whinnied with a derisive and scornful shrillness and stumped over the threshold into the deceivingly warm-looking but frigid sunshine, and was gone. There was a fire in the stove by which they sat, but, even so, a small chill seemed to descend on the company after he had departed from it.

They did not surrender, though, and very soon it came to this—that on the far side of the argument, alone, defiant and confident, stood this prophet and on the nearer side stood a group of his cronies, and behind them in turn the majority of the population. It was one sole claimant against the mass opinion of the multitude and so it continued, while above and below, in front and behind, the rivers and the creeks and the branches climbed their banks.

Foot by foot, hour by hour and everywhere the torrent advanced. It had about it the sense of an unreasoning and irresistible brutality, which you feel, and feel so helplessly, in the spectacle of any one of the

major elements gone out of control. It grew a yellow and a deeper yellow with the scour from clay banks; it grew darker still with brown soil washed out of loamy lands and held in solution. The Tennessee became a river of sassafras-tea, then presently became a river of coffee, diluted but dreggy with grounds. The Ohio already was chocolate-colored, a turbid, semi-liquid monster worrying at the earth before engulfing it and with innumerable curious little whirlpools in it, like so many sucking mouths, wherever it encountered stubborn projections.

The current picked up impetus until it ran at ten miles an hour, at more than ten miles an hour, some claimed. The bottoms vanished, and higher up, small knobs turned to peninsulas, next to islands, and those islands today had shrunken to pones and tomorrow to nubbins and by day after tomorrow were gone from sight altogether. Wreckage rode past. There were sawlogs, fence-rails, frame cabins, stables, barns, woodsheds, some sliding along flat, some skewed at drunken angles, some turning and twisting to the torrential pull; and quieter eddies inshore were so full of lesser riffle, such as chips and cornstalks and tobacco-stalks and bits of planking, that you might nearly delude yourself into believing you could walk upon that surface, it seemed so solid.

Refugee camps sprang up, humans and livestock, chickens and dogs, abiding in a common discomfort under makeshift shelters. Throughout the threatened areas, clear on down to the gulf, relief measures were taken, here funds being raised for housing the dispossessed, there steps being taken to riprap the levees along their sloped faces for added strength and to

sandbag them along their tops for added height. To dwellers in these parts this was no new story. The thing had happened before. Inevitably it must happen again. But if you lived in a town sheltered behind levees your viewpoint of the menace was different from the viewpoint of him whose town, like Mr. Haley's home-town, enjoyed the somewhat uncertain protection of standing on a more elevated terrain.

Except for the seepage through those saturated walls, the town inside the levee, up to a certain point, remained reasonably dry, but a danger abode therein by day and by night, for should the pressure make a crevasse, its houses might within an hour be overwhelmed; whereas a town which depended on its natural location faced the prospect of being submerged gradually and by progressive degrees as the "backwater" came circling in from the rear and the sides, and the main flood crawled up over the bluff at the front, finally to meet and merge with that insidious flanking enemy.

"Doggone him, he certainly gives me the shivers!" said somebody, who with the eye of disfavor regarded the distant Mr. Haley where that gentleman was propped on his cane at the top of the swallowed-up slope of the wharf. "Looks like he's actually gloatin' over it all. I'll go further: Looks like he don't care how much damage'll be done or how much sufferin', just so his guess comes true. But then, of course it ain't comin' true—that's one consolation. Even so, I wish he'd go on away frum yonder. I'm sick of the sight of him, hangin' round and hangin' round all day and every day like he's been doin'. He puts me in mind of an evil spirit or a h'ant or somethin'."

As though telepathically urged by this hostile comment, the seer moved slowly off. To reach his neighborhood he had to make a small detour inland, since First Street, running parallel with the river front, already was under water at its northern end where it dipped down on beyond the old Buckner warehouse. Passing the upper doors of the warehouse, he saw that by now the hands had emptied the building. Urged on by their floor-boss and singing as they labored, they were rolling the last of the stored hogsheads out and coaxing them along an almost imperceptible slant into the next cross-street; and up there the brick sidewalks already were choked with more hogsheads, dozens and dozens of them, upended and ranked close, belly to belly, with tarpaulins spread upon their tops.

Over the way they were moving out of one of the wholesale groceries, taking time by the forelock and the stocks to temporary quarters half a mile farther out. Either gutter was a swift brook, overlapping the curbs and encroaching on the gravel so that hourly the pavement and the drive narrowed as the brook widened.

He came to his street, and the middle stretch of it was a confusion and the tail of it, going down-hill, was a Venice. Two doors above where he lived he halted to observe the activities of Mr. Honigsbaum, the gunsmith, who toiled at an earthern rampart which when completed would ambitiously enclose his establishment.

"Gittin' kind of greedy, ain't you, 'Gustus?" inquired Mr. Haley satirically. "There'll be the greatest abundance of water 'round this corner inside of three-four days without you takin' the extra trouble to fence off your own private supply."

"Stop such foolings," answered Mr. Honigsbaum.

"Dis is nod to keep der vater in; dis is to keep der vater oudt."

"Oh, is it?" and Mr. Haley cackled gaily. "Well, then, you must've forgot about havin' a dirt cellar under your place, ain't you?"

Mr. Honigsbaum gave an agonized cry and cast away his spade and ran in the shop and snatched open a trap in the floor and peered downward into a squared pool which already was within six inches of the sills and which mathematically and in accordance with an inevitable law of physics, must continue to deepen as the rivers advanced until it burst through his plankings at all their seams. He came forth and swearing freely in his native tongue, which was German, he tried to kick down the futile barricade. Once he paused for long enough to address the chortling Mr. Haley:

"Go avay, blease," he begged with a forced politeness. "Enough iss enough und too much iss chust so much more besites. Ulso you are an older man as me und I don't vant I should loose my temper, so go, blease."

In apparent high good humor, Mr. Haley went. At his front gate he stopped again and, with somewhat the air of a satisfied general considering the enfilading movements of his forces across a field of battle, he looked east and north upon a brown expanse of steadily climbing river. His small homestead perched on the brow of a minor declivity, the land at the rear dropping abruptly into a cuplike basin. Therefore his back yard already had been inundated from behind. Many trickling runlets, like skirmishers for an army oncoming, were creeping forward, uniting and threading off hither and yon, so that the space under the kitchen ell, which

rose on spindly brick props, had since morning turned into a miry little archipelago and very soon would be an unbroken pond.

Below, to the right and between his property and the foot of the street, stood two more dwellings, and these were the only two quartering him in that direction. Except that one of them was painted gray and the other green, these houses practically were identical. They were unimportant two-story structures of frame, with gabled roofs and narrow front piazzas and they sat snugly side by side, each being off-center of its narrow plot.

The division line between, though, was most clearly marked and the manner of its marking made a domestic tragedy, as all who frequented this vicinity well knew. Indeed the whole town knew about it. For the full depth of the boundary ran a tall fence of unpainted boards set upright. This fence was fully eighteen feet high. It was what is known as a spite fence. Disfiguring and ugly, it towered to the level of the eaves of either house. It cast its shadows, as the sun wheeled, first upon one clapboarded wall and then upon the other. It constantly darkened the nearer windows of both houses. It had darkened the lives of two families and, from all the present signs, would go on darkening those lives until the end of their chapter. Now it was partly submerged, so that with two feet of water at its base and more coming all the time, it resembled a wing-dam stretching lengthwise of an exceedingly muddy lake.

Out of one of these twin cottages there stepped a woman who called to Mr. Haley as he fumbled with his gate latch, and asked him to wait a minute, please.

The light of the late afternoon revealed her as a woman not young but not uncomely, with quick movements suggestive of a wren or a sparrow. She was bareheaded, with a long bibbed apron over her frock and a shawl about her shoulders. The water lapped at the top step of her porch; the lower steps were hidden. So to reach the street she crossed an improvised footbridge and, having reached it, picked her path upgrade along a narrow strip of earth that was soggy but not yet covered up.

At her approach, the lingering traces of a malicious grimace left Mr. Haley's face. He read the concern on hers. It was plain that he liked her; his changed manner proved that. Probably some people, knowing him only for a dogmatic and a crotchety and a tremendously vain old person, would have been surprised to learn that this woman valued him as her good friend and her good neighbor.

"Well, Mizz Fuqua, howdy-do?" he said to her, with a short nod of his head. He did not lift his hat. Outdoors he kept it on always and frequently wore it indoors, too.

"I've been watching for you, suh," she said. "Between spells of work I've been watching out of my parlor window. I wanted to ask you something."

"Yessum?"

"Oh, Mr. Haley, do you really and truly still think the river's coming much higher?"

"Remember what I told you last Sunday evenin' when you ast that very same thing, don't you?"

"Yes, but since then it's quit raining and turned off so nice. And today I got to hoping—hoping, with the weather so bright and clear, maybe—" She broke

off and made a new start. "We're moving all our things upstairs—I've been moving all day and trying to turn the spare-room into a kitchen where I can do a little cooking on a coal-oil stove. And my husband has rented a skiff for us to get around in. He says that by tomorrow the very last scrap of ground down in our hollow will be gone. Of course you don't need to worry so much up here above the level of the bank. But with us it means so much! He'll be out of work —the canning factory shut down at dinner-time today on account that the basement where the boilers are is beginning to fill up. And when I think of all the poor people who'll be driven out entirely, besides those who're driven out already, and on top of that when I think of the new wall-paper on my hall being ruined—"

Womanlike and, for that matter, manlike, Mrs. Fuqua was coupling the impending woes of the world at large with the woes of her small personal world. "When I think of all those things piling up along with the rest of the great big sorrow that I've had to carry all these years, well, sometimes it honestly seems like my burden's getting too heavy for me to bear it much longer without just breaking down." Her eyes were tearless; perhaps they had gone so from overmuch weeping in solitude, but there was a catch, like a dusty dry sob, in her throat. "And so I was hoping that maybe you might have changed your mind about the flood prospects since last Sunday, seeing that the sun's come out so bright—that maybe, according to your best judgment now, it wouldn't be necessary after all for us to go to all this trouble and everything?"

"Mizz Fuqua, come here a second with me." He led the way inside the gate and up the short graveled walk

to the shabby house. "Look there." He squatted, and with his forefinger pointed out a faint blackish line extending thwartwise of the sill of his door. "I don't s'pose I ever showed you that there mark before? Well, it's been there for over thirty years—thirty years plus some five or six weeks, to be exact about it. About once in so often I've touched it up ag'in with fresh paint ez a reminder, sort of. It's the high-water mark of '84. In '84 she come right there and then she stopped and then she started fallin'. Now mark my words: I hate to tell you this sence it's goin' to fret you so, but you'd better know the worst. A rainy spell comin' this late won't help this flood along much; nor sunshine won't hinder it none. You know the old sayin' round here about somethin' or other bein' ez shore ez hell and high water? Well,—'scuse my language—but ez shore ez hell, this year's high water is goin' to climb up to this here mark and it's goin' to pass it by a leedle fraction. It won't pass it much but it'll pass it. So you better keep right on with your job of movin' up into your top story—you and your sister's folks both. . . . There's somethin' else in connection with this flood I'm goin' to say to you."

"She is."

"Which?"

"My sister Lutie—she's moving upstairs, too. Just a minute ago when I passed her house coming to speak with you, I caught a little quick glimpse of her through her front window. She was taking down her parlor curtains. Oh, Mr. Haley, when I think that I can't walk into her house or speak with her—my own dear sister—or don't even see her any more except by little scraps and snatches like just now, my heart gets to be

like a lump of lead in my breast. It's like a lump of lead in my breast all the time—just like so much lead. . . . Mr. Haley, do you believe in prayer when everything else fails?"

But Mr. Haley was not thus summarily to be steered away from what lately had become his main and favorite theme.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I ain't aimin' to discourage nobody in their religion, but sence that there time when the old Red Sea rolled herself back to let the Children of Israel walk acrost dryshod and rejoicin', I ain't never heared of no case yit where prayer helt up a flood that wuz set and r'arin' to go."

"That wasn't what I meant," she began. "What I meant was praying for something else."

He seemed not to hear her, being intent on concluding his discourse. He was, as the phrase goes, so full of himself.

"Speakin' of this high water, Mizz Fuqua, there seems to be a consid'ble lot of people in this town that act like they're holdin' me responsible fur it, so to speak. Oh, I know whut they're sayin' behind my back. It's enough to make a feller plum' vindictive. But no matter whut you hear about me, I ain't vindictive. Tubby shore, there's a kind of a satisfaction in havin' it proved that you're in the right—I ain't denyin' that. And when this here prediction of mine comes true, which it most shorely will betwixt now and the tenth of next month, I expect to take the credit that's due me. But there's a sight of difference betwixt a feller's takin' credit where credit is due and bein' practically blamed, ez you might say, fur whut no mortal man can't check nor stop. F'rinstance now, take that

spiteful, thick-headed Dutchman of a 'Gustus Honigsbaum. Jest a leedle bit ago he seemed like he wanted to blame me because he'd went and made a perfect jackass fool of himself. Lemme tell you whut he done, ef you don't already know about it: It's the funniest thing you ever heared tell of."

He did tell at length and with grins and frequent chuckles. It may have been that Mr. Haley secretly was inspired to lift the woman out of her present mood, if he could; diplomacy sometimes bides in an unlikely tenement. She, though, was not to be lifted. She merely smiled wanly, her lip twitching, at the high points of the narrative, and when the narrator finished with a final humorous flourish, she took up where she had been interrupted:

"It's terrible what life can do to people. It's terrible what it's done to me and mine. Oh, how I'd love to be able to make a fresh start and wipe out all the awful misunderstanding that's separated me from my own flesh and blood for so long! Mr. Haley, did you know that it's been nearly six years since Lutie's husband put up that spite fence? Six years! It seems like sixty to me. And Lutie feels the same way about it."

"I thought you and your sister wuzn't allowed—wuzn't s'posed to be on speakin' terms?"

"We're not—but—but unbeknownst to anybody, we send messages back and forth. It's only last week—please don't tell on me, Mr. Haley; but then, I know you won't—only last week I got word to her of how my husband stood. He'd as good as forbid me ever to mention the subject again to him, but I caught him in a specially good humor one night after supper and I begged him to agree to meet Tom Fogg half-way,

thinking maybe that if he softened a little then Tom Fogg might soften a little, too. Here's what he said to me: 'I didn't start this row in the first place,' he says. 'And I didn't put up that fence either. Putting it up was Fogg's doings, not mine. As long as it stays there I'll have no dealings with him or with anybody or anything that belongs to him; neither will anybody under my roof have any dealings with him and his outfit. When that fence is taken down and not till then, will it be time to talk about making up. Now that's final,' he says, and started talking about something else.

"That wasn't much, Mr. Haley, but still, coming from Aleck, it was something; because never before had he so much as hinted to me that he might ever be willing to make friends with Tom Fogg. So next day, like I was saying, I got the word over to Lutie, and she went to her husband and tried to work on him the same as I'd done on mine. That evening she sent back this message: 'Tell my sister for me that my husband says he'll never in this world lay hands on that fence to tear it down. If ever he touches it, it'll be to build it higher.' He swears to that and I know he means it. Tell my dearly beloved sister, Eva, for me that all either of us can do, all both of us can do, is to pray to God. If God, in His mercy, can't help us or won't help us, nobody can. Tell my sister to pray and pray hard. Tell her that night and morning I'm praying on bended knees. Tell her for my sake and her sake and the sake of all the rest of us that're mixed up in this hateful quarrel, to do the same thing. Tell her I say that if God doesn't hear one of us maybe He'll hear the other.'

"So that's what I meant a little bit ago, Mr. Haley, when I asked you if you believed in prayer after everything else failed. I'm not a good church member like Lutie is. Aleck's being a freethinker, like he is, he's sort of got me leaning the same way he does. But ever since that night last week when I slipped out of my back door and got that message back from Lutie I've been praying. I wouldn't let Aleck catch me at it—it would only irritate him. So I pray behind closed doors. It's a little mite of consolation to me to think that probably whilst I'm down on my knees, Lutie, just beyond that fence, out of my sight but not fifteen feet from me, is down on her knees, too. It's not much but it's something. And a dozen times during the day when I've got a moment to spare and there's nobody around, I shut my eyes and I say to God: 'Oh, God, please pull that spite fence down.' That's all I say to Him, but over and over again I say it. . . . Oh, Mr. Haley, don't you think that praying hard and often like that might help?"

Curiously enough, having so earnestly asked her question she did not tarry for the answer to it. It was as though she feared this old man's answer might shake her in her new-found faith. With a sharp movement she shrouded her face in her shawl and turned from him and hurried away.

CHAPTER XXX—*The Spite Fence*

FROM his doorstep he watched her until she had vanished indoors. Then, very deliberately, he followed along the sloping route she had taken until he came to the spite fence and for a brief space stood abreast of it scanning the gaunt forbidding vista of it with the eye of one who knew structural woodwork. While he did this, his memory went back, reviving recollections of his earlier acquaintance with the affairs of these sundered neighbors of his, the Fuquas and the Foggs.

So this bulkhead of a fence had been up for six years? It must be six years, because Eva Fuqua had said so, but it seemed to him in retrospect that it couldn't have been nearly so long as all that. Why, it didn't seem very much more than six years since ground was broken for the two houses!

As though it were yesterday, he could repicture the day when the two households moved in. There was no fence of any sort then, nor even a hedge, between the houses; he remembered Mrs. Fuqua telling him that they had been set close together so she and Lutie, in the midst of domestic duties, could talk across to each other from their windows; he remembered also how she rejoiced that her husband and her sister's husband simultaneously had been able to buy adjoining lots down here in this hollow where land was cheap, and how she'd said it was Lutie's idea that the houses should be as

alike as two peas in a pod. The devotion of the pair of them was the talk of the street then.

But when the quarrel came—it started with so small a thing as the Fuqua dog scratching up Tom Fogg's pet flower-bed, and from that trivial beginning grew and grew until it was a thing deep and bitter—either sister, being by nature docile, had obeyed the stronger will of her husband, and so they had gone their separate submissive ways, but grieving sorely, as he and sundry others knew. And Tom Fogg, having Irish blood in him, had been hot-tempered and obstinate about it all, and Aleck Fuqua, having Scotch blood in him, had been dour and just as obstinate; and presently this fence had gone up, Tom Fogg hammering the long nails to their heads in a silent venomous fury, while morbid passers-by looked on. And here it still was, stout and strong and cruel as on the day it was built, itself not badly warped but potent still to go on warping the lives of those who dwelt in its black shadow.

As though he meant to punish it for its stubborn wickedness, Mr. Haley, before returning to his cottage, gave the nearmost boards several sound whacks with his cane. He returned then with a briskened gait. It was getting along toward dusk and he must be seeing about his supper. As a widower of long standing and one having no offspring, Mr. Haley ran a bachelor's hall. There was an old negro woman who came daily to tidy up for him and cook his meals, but for the time being he had been deprived of her services. Her cabin down by the railroad incline being already water-bound, she had declined either to move out or to dare the perils of journeying by rowboat morning and night across the intervening half-mile between her place and his.

So he made a pot of coffee for himself and fried two eggs and some ham and finished off with wildgrape jelly and cold light bread. Then he climbed into the low attic of the one-story house to rummage out his rubber boots. No doubt a good many other people in town were doing the same thing.

April came in and with it a soft balminess; and in places the full-blossomed peach trees, standing trunk deep in backwater, were like so many fat pink bouquets resting on big wrinkly copper platters. There was abundant inconvenience for nearly everybody, and for a large number, downright misery; but the visitation had its comedy touches and plenty of them.

Practical jokers made fine pretense of fishing in their own dooryards, and there was an impromptu water carnival on the wide canal which Broad Street had become, with a whole flotilla of skiffs and rafts and motorcraft going back and forth. The older men and women in the negroes' refugee camp out at the fair grounds went on strike against their rations—not because the provender was scanty but because, owing to the ignorance of a Northern-born chief of commissary they were getting wheaten loaves from the baker instead of cornbread. Three children drowned when a scow overturned, and from grief their mother was raving mad.

The gasoline packet Gipsy Girl set out to do rescue work by night and lost her bearings and went aground in, or rather on, an unsuspected corn-field four miles back from the normal shoreline. Like two vast arks, the wharf-boats loomed high above street level, their hulls nudging at the front of the boat-store. Word came of humans and farm animals marooned on barn

tops and the peaks of sodden hay-stacks. It was fine for the wild ducks and the wild geese homing up-country on their spring flights but hard luck on the rabbits and the quail.

There was a funny story in the evening paper about how a citizen in a town down-stream, while sitting on his roof awaiting succor after the levee broke, saw four clothing-store dummies traveling toward him in the swirling mill-race of the main business street, their heads bobbing together as though in conference and how, first hesitating in front of an abandoned millinery shop, they made what to him seemed the wiser choice and passed jostling in at the open doors of the Last Chance saloon. The reporter claimed that this witness laughed so hard that he slid right off his perch.

Among its local brevities that same issue of the paper carried a paragraph stating that Mr. Gholson Haley, better known as "Jericho" Haley, the esteemed former foreman of the marine ways, who was credited with having prophesied an undue amount of high water as far back as several weeks ago, was dangerously ill with pneumonia at his residence on lower Clay Street; that he had refused to be removed to the city hospital and was being cared for by Dr. Leon Calhoun, the popular and rising young general practitioner, assisted by some of the kind ladies of the vicinity; that his friends would no doubt join in wishing for him a speedy and complete recovery. This was the first intimation to many persons that the veteran was ailing; they had troubles of their own just about then. It was the first intimation to a great many that Gholson was his Christian name.

CHAPTER XXXI—*Speaking of Miracles*

WITH the slowing water up to the baseboards, the bedroom, which was at the rear of the cottage, had become damp, so by the doctor's orders the patient had been moved into the front room where there was a better air circulation and better light. To the patient it made no difference what they did with him.

He lay in what appeared to be a complete coma. His beard was spread upon a folded-back comforter which covered him to the chin. His formidable nose had lost all its color and most of its resemblance to a fat tuber. It was pale and pinched-in. It suggested now a shaved-down, craggy scrap of white quartz. The sound of his heavy, rumbling breathing filled the room.

That sound and the ticking of the clock and a constant *splash-splash* from without made undertones for the voice of a strong wind blowing in from the north-east. The wind rattled at the back windows of the cottage and whistled around its farther corners and at two of its angling dimensions, the end and the lower side, made waves which slapped up against the planking. There was less wave motion on the side to the street, for there the house formed a small lea. The skiff which had brought Mrs. Fuqua for her regular five-hour vigil by the sick-bed rocked very gently where it was tethered to one of the porch columns. At supper-time Mrs. Harkley, from up the street, would spell her.

Dr. Calhoun was gone to make his round of after-

noon calls. He had told her when she came over after giving her husband his dinner, that there was nothing really to be done except to watch for any change in the old man's condition. The crisis of the disease was past. If his heart held out he had a chance, a slim chance, for recovery. If it failed, why he would go, without pain or violent struggling and perhaps without regaining consciousness. And meanwhile let the front door and the two windows stay open—the more fresh air the better.

There was no one else there with him. She was standing at the side window looking toward the hollow, now more than brimfull. Since the day before, the rate of rise had slackened greatly. The river barely crept, whereas before it fairly had leaped at the land. Indeed, that morning it seemed to stop at the mark of fifty-four feet, two-tenths, which by a remarkable coincidence, was exactly the point it had reached away back yonder in 1884. Some optimists were claiming it had stopped there, that actually the ebb had set in. Her husband brought her the good news when he rowed back from the center of town at noontime. If this wind which had sprung up didn't shift their house on its deeply submerged foundations, the worst for them and for the community generally would be over soon. By night, before night possibly, an infinitesimal but definite recession would be recorded; so everybody agreed. With the peak passed, then the flood would abate quickly, leaving yellowish smears on everything—like dried gravy on a sloven's chin—to prove the tale of its triumph.

For a good while she stood there at the window, her eyes brooding on what she could see beyond. She could

see the bulk of her sister's house next door and beyond that, the fore and aft stretches of the spite fence, rearing its upper half above waters which twisted and sucked at and raced along the obstacle which it offered against their freer flowing. Her lips moved and formed words. Her body swayed a trifle to the intensity of her thoughts.

Suddenly she cried out sharply and cried again and bent her head and peered out, and her very soul was in her eyes. This which she beheld had been no mirage born of her wishing. The craved-for thing was coming to pass.

"Oh, it's a miracle, it's a miracle!" she screamed out, and then forgetting the low state to which the patient had sunk, she ran to his side and shook him.

"Oh, Mr. Haley!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Haley, wake up and look! Wake up and let me tell you! Oh, please, suh, Mr. Haley, wake up and help me be happy!"

Whereupon and very accommodatingly Mr. Haley did wake up. His eyelids flickered and lifted and in a rasping thread of voice he inquired:

"Which?"

"Oh, Mr. Haley, God has answered my prayers at last—He's answered Lutie's prayers. He's answering them right now, right this very minute. He sent this flood and now He's sent this blessed wind. The fence yonder—it's breaking up and it's drifting away. Half of it is gone and the rest of it is going. It's going, going, going fast, Mr. Haley! Please, suh, turn your head and look for yourself!"

Then, through her own overpowering joy, she realized that he was staring on past her and on past the foot of his bed toward the floor at his opened front door.

A tiny penciling of water was lapping at the sill, flipping over it, sliding into cracks, spreading and finding irregularities among the bare boards.

"That's whut I told the dern fools she'd do!" wheezed the roused Mr. Haley with a weak but profound jubilance. "Mebbe next time they'll listen. I sh'd say she's done beat '84 by jest about one tenth of one foot. 'Tain't much, tubby sure, but it's enough."

"But look this way now," she begged him. "That hateful fence—it's gone!"

"I heered you when you said it the fust time." His tone, growing stronger, was slightly peevish. "Well, I ain't surprised. That's only another one of the things I been expectin' whilst I wuz laid up here sick."

"Oh, Mr. Haley, did you pray too?"

"Me?—*humph!* Not me, Mizz Fuqua. I ain't prayed. I done somethin' I've had more practice at. You remember that evenin' here about ten days back when you run over here and talked to me—the day before I wuz took down with this here bad cold on my chist? You do? Well, 'twuz that same night after it got good and dark, that I waded out with a crowbar and a pick and I sort of loosened up the posts of that there fence fur you, so's to let the water git a good chance to scour 'em out by the roots. I says to myself, I says: 'Now let her come on to blow purty brisk and mebbe this here'll do the trick fur Mizz Fuqua and Mizz Fogg.' So I ain't surprised none. I think mebbe that wuz how I come to git this here bad cold in the fust place. You see, 'twuz deeper in spots out there than I thought 'twould be, and I got in over the tops of my rubber boots, and my feet and laigs got purty well soaked. But I'm feelin' a right smart better now.

Have you got any gineral idee when that brash young doctor is goin' to let me git up out of this bed? There's a sight of people in this town that I've got to go 'round amongst 'em laughin' in their faces, fust chance I git."

CHAPTER XXXII—*The Mud Clerk*

FOR making a mud clerk this is your recipe: First you catch a youth who thinks he wants to grow up to be a steamboatman. Formerly that part of it was a very much easier task than it is today. These times you must, so to speak, beat the bushes for your prey. Those times the game was numerous and eager and might be stalked in the open anywhere.

Having caught him, you accustom him to irregular hours and broken sleep and to all kinds of weathers and all kinds of underfootings; you teach him to walk up-hill of a swaying stageplank and to jump for the bank before your packet's nose touches, and it a bank which frequently is slick with yellow mire or treacherous with crumbly dried clods. You school him to perform his duties on shore with accuracy and dispatch, and then, as she pulls out, to do a flying leap for the tip of a sloped swinging perch and—even though his feet may be clumps of sticky clay, and often are—to balance himself thereon like a bareback-rider on a humpbacked horse. Finally you must make him satisfied with small wages and what he can eat, which usually is a considerable amount, and with his comparatively humble place near the foot of the roster.

You have then an acceptable mud clerk, and when someone ahead of him dies or quits, he becomes a second clerk and in time may become a first clerk, who is also called a purser, which is something none below him

ever is called; but the reason for this is not known and remains a mystery. It also is often true that if a mud clerk retires from the fellowcraft before his apprenticeship is completed, he becomes a hotel clerk or the deputy-manager of a pool parlor, so that in either case he may continue to enjoy his contacts with the traveling public.

But as regards young Benny Dozier, they did not have to catch him. He had it, as you might say, in his blood, being the last of a list of steamboatmen. His father before him had been one and likewise at least two of his uncles were clerks, and an elder cousin of his had died of being scalded with live steam at the blowing-up of the old side-wheeler Ozark Chief. So one day in his nineteenth year when he went, all tangled up in his long arms and legs, down the hill and sought out Captain Nick Rodabush, of the Richmond P. Hobson, and diffidently stated his ambitions.and said, while vainly endeavoring to swallow several invisible pigeon-eggs, that he had heard there was a vacancy in the office and he hoped—fumbling now with his large red hands —that his application might favorably be considered, he was accepted on the spot.

To the appraising eye of Captain Nick this did not seem exactly prime material, but material of any sort was harder to come by than it once upon a time had been. Youngsters of an adventurous mold were prone to go into railroading or into the thriving infant industry of automobiling or to take up electrical work, which also was getting to be more and more of a business. Things no longer were as they had been when a skipper might pick and choose among the smart juveniles of the community. As Mr. Jericho Haley, the official sooth-

sayer of the local wharf, had said in the captain's hearing just here the other day:

"Whut's the use of the gov'mint talkin' about squanderin' all these here millions of dollars fur locks and dams and sich, tryin' to make a nine-foot stage the year 'round? In the first place, they couldn't never do it, it bein' ag'in the plan of Gord Almighty Hisse'f; and in the second place, s'posen' they could? It'd take years and years to finish the job, wouldn't it?

"Well, fifteen years frum now, yes, or ten, the way things air goin' now, where'd they git the crews to run them fleets of newfandangled steel freighters they talk so biggitty about? How many pilots and engineers and so forth did there used to be hangin' 'round this very town? And how many of 'em air left? And how many likely boys air takin' up steamboatin' fur a livin'? Jest about one where there used to be forty—jest about!

"Yas, suh, gentlemen, I'm tellin' you that ez a steamboatin' proposition for anything except excursion boats and short hauls, the pore old Ohio is already dyin' off; they might ez well let her go on dyin' peaceable in her own bed."

Mr. Haley was unaware that he had made a joke. He continued:

"Or take the Cumberland—they've about killed her off with their fool improvements. Improvements—hell! Thank Gord they've left the Tennessee purty much alone till now. They ain't forever dredgin' at her bottom and monkeyin' with her sides. They're leavin' her be practically ez she wuz frum the beginnin'. Consequence is she's still hangin' on and her trade fairly healthy—thank Him ag'in!

In a measure, Captain Rodabush shared these gloomy

viewpoints. A majority of the veterans did share them. Still, he needed a mud clerk. He took what he could get. There were occasions subsequently when he was moved to remark:

"Yes, and one hell of a git I got, too!"

Because young Benny Dozier was not a glittering success at his chosen profession. It wasn't for lack of trying. He meant well; but the statistics show that fully fifty percent of the old gentlemen in carpet-slippers and skull-caps who string along the front porches of county poor-farms on pleasant summer afternoons are persons who meant well. One outstanding trouble with Benny was that he couldn't control his unruly members. He was incredibly awkward. Walking at ease—if so gangling and loose-jointed a gait as his might be said to have any ease in it—he would lumber along making loud sounds with his heels, and if he sought to hurry he tripped himself. He got in his own way; what was worse, he couldn't for the life of him manage to keep out of the way of anyone else. Another score countable against him was that he so easily lost his head, which, as his impatient superiors had been heard to exclaim, was a very trifling loss indeed and not worth worrying over.

In small emergencies a terrific embarrassment overcame this unfortunate young man, so that his tongue faltered and his Adam's apple emotionally rose and fell and his constellation of freckles stood out like paled and plaintive stars from the blazing sunset of his blushes. Finally, and for the summing-up, he was chronically addicted to the habit of falling in love. Over, though, on the credit side of the ledger there was this to be said for him: He wasn't afraid of work;

and he had a wonderful disposition. In spite of everything else, you just had to like him.

Falling in love—that, it was commonly agreed, remained his greatest fault. With or without provocation, and lacking any encouragement whatsoever, he gave his ardent heart to every personable female, maiden or widow, as it might be, who set foot aboard the Richmond P. Hobson. He always got it back though; invariably it was returned to him promptly. And then it would bleed a little, and then quickly its bruises would heal, and its scars seam over, and it would be ready for bestowal upon the next comer. That hopeful heart of his seemed to have the resiliency of new rubber but the durability of cast-iron. It and its owner got to be a standing joke with the rest of the white crew. They racked him with their teasing. Behind his back, the darkies sniggered at him.

"Look out to stand by, kid," someone, with a wink and a grin, would say. "Yonder comes another member of the opposin' sex."

"Oh, shut up your mouth and quit your foolin'," the victim would say, gulping hard.

"Tubby shore, she looks like she might be risin' of seventy-five, and she's got a figger like a bran-sack with a string tied 'round it 'midships, and I wouldn't be surprised but whut she dips snuff; still, when all's said and done, she's of the sex. Don't you feel the rash sort of breakin' out on you already?"

"You fellers make me sick."

"You're sick all right but none of us ain't responsible fur it."

"Say, let up, won't you, please?"

"Love-sickness—that's whut ails you, my son, and

frum the way it looks to me, you've got the trouble in the most violent form there is. I reckin there's no hope fur you neither till some woman up and marries you. That's said to work a complete cure in some cases."

Certainly ridicule did not help the complaint. The youth's malady was like certain weedy growths in that it seemed to thrive on mistreatment. On an average of about once a month he could be counted upon to oblige the steamer's company.

There was the lovely little heiress from away up North, the one with the blue eyes and the maize-yellow hair, who was on her way to Shiloh with her grandfather, a veteran of the Union armies, and now, by all accounts including his own, preeminent in the flour-milling interests of St. Paul, Minnesota. She was worshiped dumbly and from afar—Benny did much of his worshiping at a distance—until the spoiled beauty, perhaps not knowing her voice carried to him, or perhaps not especially caring whether it did—being at the age when pretty girls are likely to be cruel by intent—inquired of Mr. Given, the chief engineer, why that gawky sandy-headed young man hadn't learned to remember where he put his feet down, so that the next time he wanted to use them he could pick them again without stumbling over one or both? He fled away then, with the hateful sounds of Mr. Given's horse-laugh ringing in his tingling ears, and during the remainder of her journey ventured no more within tongue-range of her.

There was the schoolteacher from Murray, who wore nose-glasses and the hair slicked back, and who addressed him in the austere and admonishing tone of one dealing with a blundering small urchin. He re-

covered from that attack rapidly, though. Even a passion so fervid as his passions were could not live for long in the after-chill of an intellectual glacier.

And—to cite a particularly joyous instance—there was the graceful, full-voiced star pitcher of the Amazonian Diamond Champs, a somewhat weather-beaten aggregation of athletic prodigies whose predecessors of a decade or two before had been known to fame as the Chicago Bloomer Girls. The champions were going up the river to fill an engagement with a crack amateur nine at Sheffield. Young Benny took one look at the lot of them and made instant choice and succumbed utterly.

That same evening, skepticism regarding the authenticity of his handsome charmer was aroused in the breast of Mr. Childers, the head clerk, when on going by a stateroom and the door chancing to be ajar, he noted that the favored one had enlisted the aid of a colored chambermaid for the buttoning-down-the-back of a frilly muslin shirtwaist—not a garment of hooks and eyes, which, as was understandable, might present difficulties to even the most practiced of feminine fingers, but a garment of buttonholes and sizable buttons. Being a seasoned married man, Mr. Childers felt sudden doubts about things. These doubts were confirmed next morning during the breakfast hour as this shrewd observer idled along past the ladies' table and saw where, under the rose powder on those rounded cheeks, the suspect needed a shave.

Mr. Childers did not go about proclaiming his discovery. He kept the gorgeous news for a select few, who joined him in a secret campaign of watchful waiting. They had their reward when, before gleeful wit-

nesses, young Dozier mustered up the courage to offer the object of his admiration a floral gift—specifically, a rather dusty and shopworn "winter bouquet" purchased by him in a general store at a way-landing—whereupon the recipient, stepping for the moment out of character, ungraciously declared that a chew of tobacco would be preferable to a bunch of dried fodder every time.

They almost laughed the boy to death over that affair.

And there—oh, there must have been fully a dozen at least, all of them processionally compassed within Benny Dozier's first year of service. One round trip for falling in love and three ensuing round trips for getting over it—that made four weeks, roughly—and then he would be all set and eager for a fresh start. Mr. Given claimed that having Benny along was like having an animated calendar—you knew when the new moon was due just by keeping an eye on their mud clerk.

CHAPTER XXXIII—*True Love and a Cyclone*

IT was perhaps characteristic of the species that when Benny Dozier finally did go the limit, amatively speaking, he should dedicate his affections to one who, both in years and experience, ranked him by very considerable margins. At thirty-five, or thereafter even, your average unattached male is given to looking with delight upon mere chits in their alluring latter teens. The winsome damsels scarce can be too young or too tender for his fancy. But at twenty—and Benny had recently celebrated his twentieth anniversary when this came to pass—one frequently prefers the maturer types. All at once, so it seemed to him, he realized he had been wasting his time and his thoughts—and on occasion his salary—upon miscellaneous females, while through this storm-tossed, this bitter-mixed-with-sweet period, a kindly destiny was preserving him expressly for Miss Rosetta Finchley.

Miss Rosetta Finchley did not enter his life and then swiftly depart out of it again leaving a void, as each of those others had done. To be sure, she came and she went, but regularly as spaced intervals she reappeared. She was a traveling saleswoman for a jobbing establishment in Chattanooga, and her territory was the lower valley.

On a dewy spring morning at some inconsequential port which thereafter would remain photographed on

Benny's brain as the sun-gilded background for a most glorious vision, she boarded the Richmond P. Hobson. Subsequently and on into the summer, she preferably booked her passages on the same packet. For the trig and tailor-made Miss Finchley would never see her thirtieth birthday unless she looked over her shoulder and, in those three days of leisurely down-stream journeying to the mouth, she had added not one but two strings to her bow. She overlooked no chances, Miss Finchley, which perhaps accounted for her success against masculine competition on the highroads and the by-roads of merchandising. As between an excellent prospect and an easy conquest she would encourage the conquest until the prospect declared himself, one way or the other. And surely no one could blame her for that—at past thirty.

Something awakened in Benny's bosom the moment he knew her—something deep and strong, something which seemed to permeate every fiber of his being. It was a something which now would fill him with a desire to do noble deeds before the eyes of his lady-love and then again would make him crave to drop down before her and let her tread upon him with her dainty feet. It made him lie awake through the night's more or less silent watches, conjuring up gallant speeches for her private ear, only by day to turn him into an inarticulate and fumbling booby when the opportunity to speak came.

It made him write wildly amorous verses, which he tore up, and stiff, formal letters, which he mailed; and the verses were replete with "loves" and "doves" and "thou arts" and "my heart's" and "mes" and "thees," but the letters always ended with "Yours Respectfully."

It made him long to grip the throat of Pilot Lon Winfrey and twist that useful organ beyond recognition, for in the dapper and self-confident Mr. Winfrey he jealously beheld a formidable rival. It made him crave to enfold her within an everlasting embrace, yet palsied his yearning arms did she but brush against him the hem of her garment. It even made him forget he had an appetite.

As proof thereof, take the blessed hour of the fragrant May nooning when first they met and had converse; or rather, she conversed, and he, red as a ripe beet and scuffling with his soles on the grit-covered hurricane roof, made signs and muffled wordless sounds. Presently, stealing up from the pantry below, came rich frying smells. A steel steamship holds its smells, but a wooden steamboat circulates them. Also noises arose —the clatter of heavy chinaware, the tinkle of thick glassware, from where on the tables under their feet the black victualers deposited platters containing pies, each pie orthodoxically cut four ways, and plates containing gingersnaps and small cakes iced with a most durable-looking pink icing; and placed plated castors for centerpieces; and ranged pitchers of ice-water and sweet milk and buttermilk; and erected flanking breastworks of sliced light-bread and squares of smoking cornbread and mounded hot biscuits. Young Ben harkened not nor heeded, nor sniffed even. For once he was unaware of a clamorous gong being beaten by a cabin-boy who passed from place to place. He was a king on a golden bark aglide over a silvern sea.

It was the lady who eventually remarked that surely it must be dinner-time, adding delicately and by way of a hint, that she had breakfasted early and sketchily.

Mr. Given said later that he could not recall a previous instance of their mud clerk being so much as a half-minute late about getting there for a meal. But now he actually dawdled over his food, Mr. Given also recording that phenomenon.

In short and in fine, Mr. Dozier was suffering the commonest form of the oldest and the maddest and the painfullest and the most delicious disease in the world, with not a single characteristic symptom missing.

Making her second trip a fortnight later, Miss Finchley the more securely riveted the shackles upon her junior captive, conceded such to be possible in the case of a prisoner already chained hand and foot. Mr. Winfrey, though, was inclined to be skittish; he was fascinated but he was careful of enticements and snares. He had been a care-free bachelor so long. He made an attentive courtier; still he showed reluctance for the hobbles and the halter which might be fashioned from the fabric of any straight-out declaration on his part. Had Mr. Winfrey been a horse—a gay, cavorting, unmated colt, in a pleasant meadow—it could have been said of him that here was a colt charging up to the pasture bars and nickering at any comely filly but shying back from the prospect of being bitted and bridled and broken to double-harness. However, we are not particularly concerned with Mr. Winfrey's preliminary reactions.

It was on her next trip that Miss Finchley, being perhaps actuated by motives which under existing circumstances were perfectly legitimate, took advantage of a lull in a decidedly one-sided dialogue with the rapt and practically voiceless Benny, to ask questions regarding the prospective future of a steamboat clerk, as con-

trasted with, say for example, the position of an already established pilot. Or perhaps she merely spoke at random. Anyhow, she asked questions.

Of course it must be fine to graduate into a head-clerkship and to have so much responsibility and all that; but wasn't it true that promotions in this field so often came so slowly? A pilot had a very responsible post, too, didn't he?—different, of course, from a clerk's but with duties to perform which, if an accident occurred, such as a wreck or a fire, might affect the lives of the passengers. She'd heard somewhere, or read somewhere, that it was a pilot's place to stand to the wheel until the last soul was ashore even though he drowned or was burned up. How noble an end that would be—to sacrifice one's own life for the sake of others! But then, probably a good clerk never shirked danger, either; she was quite sure of that. So why was it—she couldn't help wondering—why was it a pilot drew a larger salary than any other officer in a crew did —more even sometimes than the captain? Maybe that wasn't so, though? Maybe that was just talk? And why was it they insisted on calling the third clerk a mud clerk? Personally, she liked the title of third clerk so much better. It sounded so much more dignified. For one, she always thought of him as the third clerk, never as the mud clerk. He believed that, didn't he?

He did—most gladly he did. He wished to tell her of clerks who had died at their posts, of subordinates who, in the midst of panic and dread disaster, had played heroic rôles. But her hand fell lightly then, in the merest suggestion of a caress, upon his quivering arm, and all he could do was mumble and wriggle and nod repeatedly. Why must he be so dumb when tor-

rents of eloquence surged within him? Why had nature set up those locked flood-gates down inside him? He told himself, since he could not tell her, that if ever there came a chance—well, he'd show her; he'd show everybody else, too. Deeds spoke louder than words. Some gallant deed would be his advocate, revealing to her how boundless was his devotion, how resolute his character, how strong the very warp and woof of him.

And on the second trip thereafter, Miss Finchley again being among those present, his chance did come. On the edge of twilight of a baking hot evening, the Richmond P. Hobson, being up-bound, ran headlong into a promising baby cyclone.

There was but little warning; indeed, you might say there was no warning at all. In those parts, and given certain atmospheric conditions, these nasty visitations make up suddenly and descend unexpectedly, do their damage and dissolve into harmless capering zephyrs, and all in less time than it would take to tell it.

So it was in this instance. All that afternoon the packet had plowed along through cloaking blankets of heat under a lightly overcast sky. The staterooms were like so many little bake-ovens; the long stretch of cabin space, even with the doors and windows all opened, was draughtless and terribly humid; you could have cooked eggs on the hurricane roof. Supper having been eaten, the passengers and such members of the crew as were off watch, sat well forward on the boiler-deck in limp and listless discomfort and watched the twin rows of tall wooded hills slide past and vanish into the mists behind. Not a breath of air ruffled the surface of the water; it lay smooth and looked dead, and the approach of dusk brought no suggestion of coolness.

All at once the man in the pilot-house was aware of a curious sulphurous glowing against the heavens and, by reflection, upon the river. One moment it wasn't there and the next, so it seemed, it was. No wind had brought it, either, and yet beyond the sky-line he caught a confused sound, a sort of far-away roaring sound. He shook his perspiring head in annoyance and bewilderment. For all that it glowed so, the manifestation gave off no real light. On the contrary, the adjacent shore-marks had suddenly become indistinct behind a strange ominous haze.

The worried steersman peered right, then left, then ahead, and the sweat in his palms congealed to a cold moisture, and he snatched his wheel over hard and yanked at his bell-cords, sending a jangle of alarm signals to the engineer for he saw the thing coming.

It was coming up and at them out of the west as though the sun, going down so hot and angry, had foaled an aërial demon in its bed beyond the horizon. It literally leaped into view above where the paralleling lines of boundary bluffs seemed to come together in the next bend on beyond. It was not funnel-shaped as your summer twister usually is. It was of a cylindrical shape and it lacked the customary tail. It was yellowish, with some green in it, and it had a sort of venomous radiance, and violently it spun about, spun about, like a balloon in a vortex. It was not so much like a cloud as it was like a fat, smooth-bottomed copper kettle. Wisps of vapor flapped and trailed from it, but it seemed solid enough for metal, being compact and taut within the gaseous substances which formed its skin. And now the whole firmament was rocking with the voice of its terrible singing.

Spinning and howling, it bounded over the hilltops, the trees on the crests of the hills twisting and snapping and splitting under its passing swipe; and it dipped down and hit the river and turned it into an ugly sea; and caught the steamer a quartering stroke and tossed her about and sent her helplessly down-stream, while a confused uproar of startled cries and shouted orders fused with the creaking of her timbers and the whining of her braces. Her chimneys swayed like saplings in a gale, but their stays held. The long jackstaff at the bow broke off, though, fell rearward against a combing, and caromed off into waves which already whipped so high their spray that it wet the planked sides of the steamer clear up to the level of her second deck.

You would have said the storm had picked on the careening packet for its particular plaything, its favored toy. It encompassed her completely. It took her into its midst and sent her right down the river, and all the while she turned dizzily end for end. This, however, was in her favor—a straightaway blow of that force would have swamped her surely, but this sportive little monster, by buffeting her first on this flank and then on that, kept her revolving but also kept her from capsizing. For all that she circled so madly, her rate of speed was greater than ever it had been under steam. Not until later did anyone realize how far in a crowded space of minutes it did carry her.

It carried her along until a great glare of lightning burned a blazing seam through the brassy murk, and thunder powerful enough to be heard above the wind's screaming crashed out overhead. Therewith torrents of rain descended, and in the comparative peacefulness

which instantaneously ensued, somebody called out in tones of shaky gratitude, "Thank God!" It was somebody who knew through past experiences that when the rain comes the worst of a tornado, nine times out of ten, is over and deliverance is at hand.

This was one of the nine times. Miraculously the Richmond P. Hobson found herself no longer playing that horrible teetotum game, but rocking in the rumpled wake of her tormentor, which, having disgorged her and taken a second bounce, was gone off and away for parts unknown, as a distant, lessening tumult to the northeastward testified. Twenty miles away the abating cyclone spared all the saloons and destroyed both of the colored churches in a Tennessee town, and then called it a day and quit.

On the steamer, the relief succeeding the terror was fated to be a very brief relief. Because immediately, and before persons could take stock of their sensations or even remember what they had done and said, a fresh cause for apprehension arose. A frightened captain of the watch ran up from below to spread the news that the hull had sprung a leak and was filling. Sharp on his coming, a slight listing, a certain logginess, confirmed his story. Either some of her seams had wrenched open under the late stress or her bottom had raked a submerged obstacle—sunken log or rock or what-not—and no one, in the hurly-burly of all that excitement, had been the wiser for it.

The situation again was perilous. The captain and his crew realized that, and so, also very soon thereafter, did the huddled passengers realize it; and one and all suffered a recurrence of that unpleasant sinking sensation at the pit of the stomach. The sec-

ond panic almost overlapped the first, it followed so fast.

A number of interrelated factors made for the new menace. To begin with, an overwhelming and utter darkness had magically fallen. It was as though midnight had arrived four hours ahead of its schedule. You couldn't see your hand before your face. Across the blackness and under that terrific downpour, the land, either side, completely was blanked out. The lights which the government maintained to serve as steering points were gone from this devastated stretch —overturned and dashed out or bodily blown away. The pilot knew for certainties only that he had the battered craft under control once more and that, approximately, she must be near midstream since the currents tugged strongly at the wallowing hull. With relation to the adjacent topography he had a rough idea where he was, but nothing more than a rough idea. To top off, the searchlights at the bow were out of commission. Word of this culminating mishap already had been shouted up to him. The flagpole, in its collapse, had stripped the wiring and the gears away.

The lightning didn't help him either—it was too dazzling. All he could do was ring for full steam and point her nose blindly toward what he reckoned to be the nearer shore and drive ahead, trusting to Providence that, if she didn't founder before they got there, she would not smash headlong into a sheer rock cliff, which latter tragic contingency inevitably meant deep water beneath and around about her and a remarkably meager hope of getting her occupants off without at least some loss of life.

Already, by the master's orders, members of the

crew had hauled life-preservers out of the staterooms and distributed them among the passengers milling to and fro on the drenched forepeak, and bade them take stations on the steamer's upper works. Afterward it was narrated how a quivering presiding elder turned his scared face to a stolid hog-buyer and asked him between teeth that chattered:

"B-b-brother, can you pray?"

"Nope," answered the other, with a calmness which, under the circumstances and all things considered, must have been aggravating, "but ez it so happens, I kin swim purty good."

Thereupon he made ready to swim. Quite a number did likewise.

CHAPTER XXXIV—*Benny Dozier Up and Quits*

DURING the involuntary retreat of the Richmond P. Hobson, young Benny Dozier had lain in a pleasant coma on the starboard guards amidships. He remembered hearing the storm brewing. That was when he was on his way to the ladies' cabin on an errand for his beloved; she thought she had dropped her handkerchief there. He remembered this much and then for a spell he remembered nothing more whatsoever. A cross-hall door, torn from its hinges and pitched outward by the first great gust bursting in from the opposite direction, had dealt him so hard a blow on the head that he went right off to sleep.

He continued to sleep while the packet did her whirligigging flight and slept on even after she had been spewed out of the cyclone's core, like Jonah out of the whale's belly. What brought him to was a deluge of rain-water upon his upturned face and a cabin-boy, who carried a flapping cork jacket on either arm, stepping upon him. So he rose up, being still somewhat dizzy, and went running to find Miss Rosetta Finchley. En route he bumped into a saturated somebody who, without wasting words, told him what had happened and what added danger now threatened and what forlorn expedient was being tried. So then he knew more surely than ever where his place was. His place was by her side, his task to rescue her if such were mortally possible and, failing at that, to perish with her.

But when, half a minute later, he found her and she refugeeing on the exposed hurricane roof with many others as sopping wet as she was—which was as sopping wet as it was humanly possible to be—there was, alas, no room for him by her side. The available space by her side was tenanted by Pilot Winfrey. Our hero was ten feet or less from them when, by a dimmish illumination streaming from a window in the texas just overhead, he saw them and they—or at least she—saw him. Mr. Winfrey was buckling one of the cork-stuffed vests about her. Even in a moment so parlous, his manner was protective, proprietorial.

So that was how it was, was it? So be it then! He, Benny Dozier, mud clerk, would show her the stuff that was in him. He and he alone, would light for her a path to possible salvation.

At his lips he made a megaphone of his cupped hands and through it, across the intervening space, he shouted his altered intentions. It was doubtful whether she heard him—there was so much confusion and so great an outcry and such a cloudbursty spattering and pelting. So he worked his arms in a swift pantomime, striking himself on the breast, then pointing ahead and below and, seeing that she appeared to understand, he turned about and sped off, making for the lower deck. In the companionway he met several passengers climbing up. Like a projectile he bored through them; and next, darting into the deserted cabin, he caught up as he passed, his lantern from its ordained spot under the overhang of the clerk's window. It was burning; an hour before the watchman had attended to that detail. As he loped outdoors again he turned the wick higher, shook the lantern to make the oil feed

plentifully. In another flash he was below on the forecastle, with both the mates and a handful of jabbering but disciplined rousters.

There was no need to tell First Mate Dink O'Ryan his purpose. At a glance that gentleman comprehended. He shook his head, though, and fixed a detaining grip on Benny.

"Whut's the use, kid?" he asked. "Ef we're fixin' to butt into a bluff, which is whut we're liable to do half a minute frum now, you won't have a Chinaman's chance out yonder on the fur end of this here stage-plank. And ef it's thick timber you'll be breshed off like a—"

"Lemme 'lone!" snarled Benny. "You grab aloose of me! It's me goes ashore first of all the white officers when we make a landin', ain't it? Then, by gum, it's me goes first tonight!"

"It's your fun'el!" said Mr. O'Ryan. He snapped an order and, obeying him, his squad began to lower away on the slings of the gangplank projecting like the big wooden antenna of a big wooden bug from the steamer's nose. When, swinging and dropping jerkily, it still was at an angle of thirty degrees or so, Benny started up it. As he went by, Mr. O'Ryan hit him a friendly slap on the back for congratulatory hail or everlasting farewell, as the case might be.

Benny could not swim a lick; he'd thought of that. He wore no life-preserver; he hadn't thought of that. He kept going.

For once in his steamboating career, his foot-grip on the stage was secure. Without a slip he made the farther end. He balanced there at the tip, swaying to its motion above the flattening swells, his figure out-

lined by his lantern gleam for those who watched from directly back of him and from the hurricane deck above. He hoped she was watching him. He felt like a demigod.

One split second later he felt like a bullfrog—he behaved like one, too. There was a terrific jar somewhere beneath and behind him, and the stage-plank bounced up like a spring-board, and Benny Dozier, becoming a comic thing of flying long arms and flying long legs, was catapulted ten feet into the air and ten feet more on into the night. He soared grotesquely, like a splayed comet, since by instinct he held still to his beacon. He came down head first, *kerplunk,* like a plummet lead. He went under water but—to relieve the suspense—not very far under.

There was less than four feet of water over the sandy bar which made out below the outlet of Gum Slough. That twister had indeed borne the steamboat far back down-stream—at least a mile farther back than her pilot's mental calculation had allowed for. The abruptly halted craft ceased her quivering, and even before Benny quit trying to swallow the Tennessee River and decided to come up, the captain from aloft had shouted out his glad tidings—the boat safely beached on a shallow and no more danger for anybody—and a halleluiah chorus of thanksgiving was starting.

So then Benny came up, and he stood there shoulder-deep, facing the boat, and spat it out, pint by pint, and strove to readjust his mental processes. And then, right then, at that pregnant moment, he heard something which, ringing clear above all other sounds, pierced him like a sword. He heard her laughing. She laughed loudly and shrilly and without pause. He

thought—naturally he thought—she was laughing at him.

Wanly, he wiped his eyes and peered aloft and then a flash of lightning came—sheet lightning, this time, broadly illuminating—and he saw how, still rocking to her laughter, she was held fast in an encircling arm by the accursed Winfrey, her head against his breast, his free hand patting her on the back. How was Benny to know that a lady in the acute hysteria following a severe nervous strain would be likely to lean for support against the nearest solid body?

Benny didn't know. Inside of his dank bosom something seemed to snap. He turned around and he waded away and never looked back, either, and the fringing bushes swallowed him up. There was a doubled symbolism to the aforesaid swallowing-up:

A young man lately in love had become a confirmed woman-hater, or believed he had. Beyond peradventure, a young steamboatman had definitely become an ex-steamboatman.

Next day at an inland station forty miles by the steam-cars from where he had gone ashore, the ex-steamboatman read in a Nashville morning paper a telegraphed account of the Richmond P. Hobson's misadventure. One paragraph down near the foot of the page he reread several times, meantime grinding his teeth. This paragraph ran thus:

> The "mud clerk," Benny Dozier, aged twenty, an orphan whose home port is at Paducah, was at first reported missing but is now believed to be accounted for. When the captain checked up on the lists of those known to be aboard, there was no

sign of this individual, but later members of the deck-crew reported having seen him running up the bank immediately following the enforced landing. Subsequently a young man answering to his general description was said to have been seen by a farmer named Harper, residing some distance back in the valley, who is alleged to have stated that the person referred to passed his house afoot in a disheveled and apparently distracted state, refusing to answer questions about himself and pausing only long enough to inquire the direction of the nearest railroad point. It is believed that fright must have temporarily unhinged the youth's reason, causing him to be filled with a morbid desire to get away as far as possible from the river on which he had just passed through such a severe ordeal.

Two days thereafter, well below Memphis and across the Mississippi state line the woman-hater applied for employment to the manager of a large lumbering concern. He came at what for him was an opportune moment. Both as to skilled labor and unskilled, the plant was short-handed. Barely had he outlined his general qualifications, when the manager cut in with:

"That's enough—you look like maybe you might fill the bill. We're needing a shipping-clerk in the yards here and we're also needing somebody to do checking up—sort of a rough bookkeeping job, it is—at one of our camps down in Cameron Parish, Louisiana. One job 'll pay about as well as the other, but I figure you'd probably like the opening here the best, this being a good, lively, growing town with plenty of pretty girls and young fellows in it, whereas down yonder in

Louisiana you'd be out in the tall timber with a boarding-gang, away off from everything, pretty near it, and liable not to see a white face outside of your own crew for weeks at a time. You see, I'm telling you beforehand what you'd be up against, so there'll be no come-back afterwards. Well, what about it, son?"

"If you don't mind, I'll take the job that's plum' off in the deep woods, please, suh," said the misanthrope.

CHAPTER XXXV—*In the Year of the Big Freeze-Up*

"THIS," stated Cap'n Tip January, addressing a slick and glistening world—"this is the fust time ever I done this."

Showing marked agility for one of a ripened age, he let himself down from the overshot gunwale of his packet and set his rubber-soled boots firmly upon a dangerously smooth footing.

"Yes, suzz," he went on to say, "more'n a thousand times, I reckin', I've rode a steamboat through this here chute, goin' and comin'. And fur ez fur back ez I remember, mighty near it, I've been travelin' it back and forth, swimmin', mebbe, or else pullin' a yawl or a skiff or somethin'. But this'll be the fust and only time that ever I walked over it dry-shod."

Since he had no hearers it would seem Cap'n January spoke for his own benefit. Ordinarily he was not given to talking to himself. Still, it was an occasion when anyone might be excused for departing from the habits of a lifetime because this sort of marvel came but once in a lifetime, even on trade-waters where almost anything might happen—and did.

He faced west. Behind him was the inner line of the island, banked high with crusted snow, a polar hummock set down by error several thousands of miles south of where polar hummocks belong. The slender naked branches of its fringing willows made a pattern

of black hieroglyphs against all that white, and fronting these, his steamer was like a fat sugar-plum imbedded in the icing of a great wedding-cake.

She was solidly frozen in, fore and aft. She was one of a long row of frozen-in shipping—tugs, packets, towboats, barges, coal-flats, shanty-boats, and so on. From above the island sounded the disconsolate honkings of wild geese seeking a feeding-ground in the covered corn-fields, and not finding it.

Where he looked, with puckered eyes, there ran a glary surface which stretched away flat and unbroken until it met the slope of the mainland. On beyond, a pale and sickly sun was going down behind the town's transformed low sky-line. The general effect was that of a well-isinglassed Christmas card. It was glitterful but it was drear. It was about as dreary an etching as you would care to look upon unless so be you were a Laplander.

That was the cruellest winter this southwestern river country ever had known. So far as the weather bureau's records showed, it was the cruellest winter the country at large ever knew. There had been blizzards —not the make-believe blizzards of excited newspaper reports but the genuine articles—from the Rocky Mountains to the gulf coast and the upper Florida peninsula. There had been zero temperatures in Louisiana. There was heavy ice afloat in the Mississippi as far down as Vicksburg. There was a fuel famine.

Of course it all had to come the very winter a couple of millions of American boys were in camp getting ready to go and fight the Germans. If you were a soldier in wooden barracks you'll remember without prompting that particular winter.

Directly hereabouts were no encampments, but that didn't mean there was no suffering. White people had red chapped faces; colored people turned an ashen gray, like mottled slate. And the Ohio was gorged from Cairo clear up, which wasn't unprecedented; but the Tennessee was frozen from down here at its mouth to its source-springs in North Carolina and Virginia, and that was unprecedented.

So navigation was all locked up and had been since the beginning of this present month. And Captain Tip January, with marvelings in his soul and caution in his steps, could cross on the ice where always before blue water, or blue water tinted with saffron—it depended on the season—had poured by a well-protected port.

More for the sake of the experience than because he had any real business ashore, he did cross now, following a lightly traced course made by the feet of earlier adventurers. He came without mishap to the bank at the farther end of town and toiled up between frost-stiffened drifts which, in places where the wind had been at them, were girth-deep on either side of the winding pathway leading to the top of the small bluff.

Cutting across lots on the firm snow, he got into Third Street and headed down it toward the center of things. He met few pedestrians, saw few signs of outdoor stir. It was as though the land dwellers, following the example of the water-craft, had gone into hibernation until further notice. Thus early in the clear topaz chill of the oncoming dusk, lights were popping on in some of the houses he passed so that the icicles at the porch eaves caught the colors of rose and gold and became jeweled pendants.

He was mildly surprised, though, to note the glow of lights through the windows of the old Frobisher harness shop, which to his knowledge had for many months lacked a tenant. So being almost opposite it, he slowed and looked the squatty small building over.

On its door was a crude-looking sign-board, and at once from its interior there came out to him the sound of a man's voice. Inside there someone was singing—was singing a familiar hymn at that: "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood." Whoever that unseen singer might be he knew the lugubrious words all right enough. But to carry the tune properly was beyond his powers. The dismal notes, now cracked, now husky, poured out into the street and spent themselves on its arctic emptiness.

His curiosity quickened within him and Cap'n January went nearer until, by the fading afterglow, he could read what the sign-board said. It said this:

GOSPEL MISSION. ALL CORDIALLY INVITED. ENTER IN AND HEAR YE THE WORD OF GOD. SERVICES THRICE DAILY.

The spelling was good but the letters were splayed and awkward, and the lines ran steeply downhill.

The steamboatman raised the latch and went in. Two gas-jets were burning in wall brackets, and in the middle of the floor a rusty drum-stove showed a red thread of flame through a jagged crack in its belly. But the gas flares seemed to accentuate the prevalent gloom rather than to lift it, and although the burning coals in the stove might be heard seething and popping to the draft, a numbing cold filled the farther dusky cor-

ners of the room. Overlaying all else were smells of dustiness and the smells also of mildewed leather and rotting woodwork.

The face of the one visible occupant of this bleak place matched these surroundings, for it was rather a bleak and meager face with a frigid bluish cast to it. It belonged, that face, to a small middle-aged man in black clothes who stood behind an upended packing-case on which a Bible lay with its pages open convenient to his eye. Before him were benches; you might call them that. They were boards propped on empty boxes.

It was this man who sang. He sang his hymn through, three verses and the mournful chorus repeated after each verse. He prayed a short prayer, he then read from the Scriptures a brief passage and prayed again—a benediction this time—and closed the Book; and all this while of five or ten minutes Cap'n January stook back in the shadows by the door, his cap in one hand, bending his head at the praying but the rest of the time looking steadily at the lone gospeler.

Having closed the Book, the other man moved from behind the pulpit of his packing-case and advanced to him and extended a bony hand.

"My brother," he said, "you are welcome. Every man who comes in the right mood is made welcome here."

"Looks like you didn't have so very much welcomin' to do this evenin'," answered Cap'n January. "Looks like I'm about the only feller that's dropped in."

"It's the bitter weather—I think." A downcast expression which appeared to be habitual, and which for the moment had departed from the stranger's face, re-

turned to it, making it wearied and despondent. "I trust it is the weather. In my part of the country—I hail from New England, brother—our people would not greatly mind such cold, being accustomed to it, but in this southerly country of yours it is, as I gather, regarded as a sore visitation, and your people try to hide themselves away from the winter.

"There was no one here today for my morning's service and only you now. But I hold these meetings even though no one comes to get my message. It is some comfort to think that God is hearing me even if no one else is. Brother, how is it with your soul?"

For the moment the cap'n disregarded the question so earnestly put.

"Frum away up yonder, eh?" he said. "How did you come to stray down here?"

"I travel about the country on my Master's business. Sometimes I hold outdoor meetings, sometimes I hold them in halls or rooms like this. I reached here last Monday. I am boarding with a family on this street—worthy people but careless about their souls' salvation, I'm afraid. I rented this shop, fitted it up as best I could.

"To me it seemed that the good people in this section of your city might stand in need of ministrations. Perhaps I was wrong. There has been but little response—in fact, I must admit, practically no response. But the rent was very low. I am glad of that. You see, brother, I pay my own way. I never ask for contributions. I rarely receive any."

"None of the local congregations chippin' in to help you out any?"

"None. You see, I do not belong to any creed. I

merely go about the country carrying my message as I interpret it."

"Me neither."

"How, brother?"

"Me, I don't fellership with no church, neither. Frum time to time various preachers have wrastled with me, tryin' to git me inside their own folds. Not fur me!"

"But you came in of your own free will this evening. Perhaps He sent you. Surely He sent you." Eagerness revived within the visionary. "You harkened to my poor efforts. Oh, brother, is it all well with your soul? Can I pray with you? Can I—"

"Hold on, Elder—"

"My name is Crenshaw, Albert E. Crenshaw."

"Pleased to meet you. Mine's January. But don't git me wrong, Elder Crenshaw. Since you're so kind as to ast, I ain't worryin' about my soul. It'll be twenty-five year this comin' twenty-third of next month since He showed me the way—showed it to me by the blaze of a burnin'-up steamboat. Ef you wuz better acquainted round here you'd know I'm the one they call the Prayin' Mate."

"Praise be to God for that! Mine—my conversion—came to me in a peaceful spot by the ocean six years ago the ninth day of August, last past. The voice of God came to me then and there, bidding me go forth and preach His holy word."

"It's a funny thing, you sayin' that. Because fur a spell I thought that wuz my ordained job too. I tried it but I mighty soon found out better. This here exhortin' business wuzn't fur me—I soon seen that. So I went back on the river ag'in. I try to serve the Lord

the best way I kin whilst followin' after my own trade. I ain't advertisin' it around though. I wouldn't 'a' told you only fur you bein' a preacher and astin' me p'intblank."

"I'm glad you told me. I feel—I somehow feel—there is a bond between us though we've just met for the first time." There was a pathetic sincerity, almost a pitiable sincerity about this itinerant's manner and utterance. "But what you say to me about giving up your ministry fills me with a great doubt, brother. It's a doubt which has come often to me before, but lately it has been with me almost constantly. I couldn't throw it off. Because I also have been a failure.

"I am loath to confess it but I have failed. Yet I've tried so hard. Brother, in all the six years of my new work I've never made a genuine convert, never brought an erring fellow creature to the foot of His throne." Hopelessness crept into his naturally nasal and sing-songy voice, making it yet thinner and more whiny; the narrowed shoulders drooped, and the bald head sagged, and the near-sighted eyes, blinking behind their thick-rimmed glasses, had tears in them.

"Well, now sometime soon mebbe you will," said Cap'n January, clumsily consoling. "Anyhow it must be that a feller gits credit Up Yonder fur tryin'."

"Oh, if only I could win a soul! If only He would vouchsafe me the strength and the power for which I crave. If only a few human beings—three, two, one even—would rise up and say that through my words salvation and the peace which passeth understanding had come to them—or to him—I would feel my labors had not been in vain, that my time and my lifetime's savings had not been wasted.

"I'd be paid back a thousandfold for all the scoffings I've suffered, all the disappointments I've had. I'd have my earthly reward then. I'd be surer of my Heavenly reward hereafter. I'd go on striving. I'd never quit as long as I had a tongue in my mouth or a cent in my pocket. But—it's six years and longer, brother, and in all that weary, heart-breaking time, not a single penitent."

"Well, now, you look here!" Cap'n January, towering gauntly head and shoulders above the stooped figure of the slighter man, fixed a strong, compelling hand on one slumping shoulder. "Sometimes when things looks darkest it's a shore sign it's fixin' to clear up. Now, I jest this minute got a little notion: I've got a steamboat laid up less'n a mile above here in whut us river people call the Duck's Nest—the safest winter harbor, until this year, that you'll find fur five hund'ed miles up-stream or down. There's a plenty more like her that hived in fur shelter ez usual, and now they're all trapped by this big freeze-up, same ez she is, and likely, some of 'em, to be in the middle of a bad fix without the main thaw and the main rise up the Tennessee come gradual, which is whut we're all hopin' fur.

"She's all my boat now. I used to be only part owner of her, but ez my partners died off I bought in their sheers and now she's mine. She's the oldest packet left of the few that still call this their home port, but she's ez stanch ez the day she wuz launched, and I'm kind of proud of her and set a lot of store by her; it's almost like she wuz my own flesh and blood. Her name's the Promised Land; mebbe you kin guess why I named her by that name?

"Well, elder, I'm bunkin' aboard her over there ag'in the island. I've got some of the boys out of my crew with me—the watchman and the slush cook and a couple of my niggers. Now, whut I suggest is that you come over on the ice on her tomorrow evenin'—only, you'd probably call it afternoon—whilst the daylight lasts. You'd better not make it later than tomorrow because there's a mild spell predicted, and ef it comes that ice mout start loosenin' up.

"I'll send one of my darkies to meet you here and guide you acrost. You come on over and have supper with me, and after supper you kin hold a meetin' there in the cabin where it's nice and warm and all. I'll pass the word along to some of the other boats that're frozein near by and I think I kin promise you quite a turnout.

"Besides, me and my own gang will be on hand, of course. They're mainly a rough-lookin', rough-talkin' lot but they're good-hearted, most of 'em, and they'll set there respectful and quiet and hear whut you got to say—I'll guarantee that—and mebbe it mout be that some amongst 'em mout git religion on the spot. Who knows?"

"That's it, brother, who knows!" The missionary's manner was that of one uttering a prayer. "Brother, God sparing me, I'll be with you tomorrow night. And God bless you and keep you for your kindness to a poor faltering disciple."

CHAPTER XXXVI—*The Promised Land*

IF Cap'n January had required any further confirmation for his swift appraisal of the wayfaring man's capabilities as a cleric it was forthcoming that following night before the Northerner concluded the introductory sentence of the sermon he preached.

From his platform by the purser's office in the snug and brightly lighted fore-cabin of the Promised Land, he preached it. Even those among his hearers whose contacts with the utterances of holy men were of the slightest speedily realized that here indeed was fearfully bad oratory.

Before that, though, there was a prayer and a hymn, the evangelist facing the small gathering that had been dragooned together to receive him, and Cap'n January, his sponsor and patron, standing behind him where, unobserved by Crenshaw, he might turn the menacing battery of his eyes upon any man who, from indifference or derision, dared to profane the solemnity of the service by unseemly word or look or act. His monitorship was unneeded. Every member of this commandeered flock had his own reasons for respecting the wishes of the Prayin' Mate.

Nearly every member of it had seen him in action; certainly all there had heard tales about him. So, although it was punishment, they sat on the rows of chairs which had been provided for them and in a grave and decorous silence endured the ordeal.

That's precisely what it was—an ordeal. This poor little shabby half-fed-looking devil of a Yankee, with his curious way of pronouncing his g's and his r's, might have zeal but he had no fire. That was the big trouble with him—no fire. It was evident that he followed a tiresome formula; that he repeated a patter of stock phrases used many a time before this.

You might excuse him for that; it was not to be expected that forever he could be thinking up new ways of telling the same old things, he with his mild, dull face and his shrill, unmagnetic voice. But there were no sympathetic shadings to his delivery, no rises and no falls, no force in his mechanical denunciations of sin and no pull in his droning pleas for repentance and better living.

Listening to him was like watching a wing-halted fly crawling back and forth upon a flat, dead surface. You might feel sorry for him, a man so well-meaning in his endeavors yet so woefully misguided in his choice of a calling, but at the same time you had to keep back a little pity for yourself.

In fifteen minutes, about, but it seemed much longer than that, he came to his lame climax, his conclusion rather, since his preachments, as was evident, were without climaxes. He seemed to hesitate then for just a moment before he sounded his promise of the Divine forgiveness for him who would come forward now and confess his transgressions before the eyes of his fellow-men and pledge himself to piousness and right conduct. As plainly as though he confessed it in speech, his semi-apologetic manner and his yearning yet daunted look revealed that he had so often uttered the same invitation with none to accept it.

But now a miracle was coming to pass, a miracle not to him merely but to all in that shuffling little audience. A sort of stunned hush befell as there rose from where they sat three men who shambled toward him, and they were shamefaced and embarrassed and advanced as though going against their wills. Now, out of all that group these were about the last three who, in the giddiest flights of your imaginings, you would have pictured as being moved to such degree; they being "Middlin' Meat" Hogan, carpenter on the towboat Roseclaire, a person of profane speech and loose behavior, and Jimpsy Frame, general factotum of the gasoline packet Gipsy Girl, his general repute being no less dingy than Hogan's, and Check Galloway, somebody's second engineer, who drank heavily and swore hard and generally lived his own careless life in his own careless way.

Even so, up they went in their stumbling procession and, with abashed head and mumbling indistinctly, each in seeming token of atonement put forth his hand to be grasped exultantly by Mr. Crenshaw. That was a man transfigured. Trembling on the verge of an outright hysteria of joyousness and triumph, he cried out his halleluiahs and brokenly uttered his thanksgivings and then, turning to Cap'n January, he exclaimed over and over again that his labors were justified, that now he had heart to go on at the Master's bidding, a humble garnerer of the living sheaves.

"That's the ticket, elder," was what Cap'n January answered when for lack of breath the other had halted, and his tone was understanding and congratulatory. "I kind of had a feelin' that you'd fetch some of these here boys out of their holes." He cast a quick sidewise

glance upon the three blushing candidates for the Mourners' Bench. "Yes suh, I shorely did have that very feelin' beforehand."

Exactly as though Providence, or chance—if you would rather put it that way—had chosen that psychological moment for the interruption, there followed instantly on the peak of this scene, a curious and uncanny tremor, a sort of spasmodic quivering which started in the solidly fixed hull and came up through the steamer's timbers. Also they heard now, off in the distance and close by too, a succession of sharp splitting sounds, snapping, popping sounds, rending sounds, sounds as though tremendous metal blades were clashing against some strong and slowly yielding fabric.

"Boys!" yelled one man, starting up, "shore ez shootin' she's bustin' up." And with that there was a rush for the twin doors at the front.

She was bursting free. They saw that as they came, in a jostling excited surge, out upon the boiler-deck. The night being a clear hard night with a half-moon out and many stars, they had a clear enough view of all about them. An hour before the ice had been a flawless steel mirror. Now, opening westward almost from the bow of the Promised Land and stretching to the bank on the Kentucky side, there was a crack in the mirror which, as they watched it, widened and showed black underneath. Lesser cracks, which at once became greater ones, were forming right and left of the first crevasse. Elsewhere the whole glassy surface seemed to lift and stir and ripple.

"Everybody git back to where he belongs before it's too late!"

Somebody took it on himself to shout the order. Everybody obeyed it. There was a pounding of hurried treads down the companionway, a scrambling of dark forms as they slid over the boat's gently heaving sides; then those same forms diminishing as they scattered this way and that and went slipping and skating and running toward the boats harboring in the island's lee. The dark swallowed them up, but their voices came floating back and the slither of their scuttling feet.

"Dave!" Cap'n January was addressing his second engineer, his voice rising sharply above the clamor of the parting ice. "Dave, git a good head of steam up in case we sh'd be tore loose. You'll have to do your own firin' fur a while. And roust out them two niggers frum under the boilers and tell 'em to stand by. I'll be needin' 'em to double up on our head-lines and breast-lines. And you"—he threw the command at his frightened slush cook—"you rustle up plenty of hot coffee. We'll want it by the gallon, 'twixt now and daylight. And slice up some bread and some of that there cold ham."

The cook darted off to his galley. Cap'n January laid a hand on the missionary's shoulder.

"Elder, you'll have to spend the night aboard with us—no show to git you back to town now. I'm sorry fur it. Way things air beginnin' to look, this is liable not to be the safest place in the world an hour frum now. This here"—he motioned outward—"all this here may sound skeery to you, but even so there ain't no special danger in it alone. Whut I'm worryin' about is them big jams that'll be lettin' loose up above in the narrow places and rollin' down on us. This here rise

has started down on us too sudden, that's the trouble. By rights we should 'a' had more warnin'."

"Don't be sorry, brother." Crenshaw, strangely serene and confident, looked up at him with grateful eyes. "If my summons should come tonight I'd go rejoicing. After what has just happened—this blessing on my work, and brought about by you, too—I'd go shouting happy. Why, brother, I'm glad I'm here, glad I must stay here. Perhaps I can help—at least I can serve you with coffee and sandwiches. And I can pray. Praise God for His mercies!"

"Amen!" With reverence, Cap'n January made the response as he hurried below.

Those threatening voices out of the night already had heightened until they were like musketry shots. With them, and coming from up-stream somewhere, there now were mingled peculiar rumblings and gratings. The shackled river, fighting for its release, was beseeching the ice, and the rumpled ice talked back to the river, with growls and with screechings and with loud explosive crashes.

CHAPTER XXXVII—*"Another Old-Timer Goes Ashore"*

LONG after you and I and the rest of us are dead and gone they'll still be retelling the story down there of what happened in the ravaged mouth of the Tennessee when the big gorges went out—how the jostling floes come pushing down, and they piled atop of one another ten, fifteen, eighteen feet high; how the suddenly released current and the pressure from behind shuffled them like so many playing-cards, over and under and through; how except for the choke of an even greater blockade in the Ohio, they might harmlessly have swept eastward out and away past Livingston Point, but how, because of this, they were driven back and sent rasping on slantwise against the Kentucky shore, and it close-ranked with craft; how this boat was sheered down at her moorings and how that one went to her finish abandoned but riding high and with all her lights blazing; and how—this usually being the snapper of the tail of the tale—the estimated total of damage reached the breath-taking figure of a million dollars.

You see, among those people a million dollars, no matter how you may look at it, still is a million dollars. It always was and probably it always will be.

With scores risking themselves in gallant attempts to save their own property or the property of their employers—successful attempts in some instances but

more often vain—it was remarkable, as everybody afterwards agreed, that the actual loss of life should have been so small—only one life lost outright and a second man who had been injured dying a few hours later. But the doctor said this one might have lived, in a crippled state but reasonably sound otherwise, if only he had listened to reason.

He wouldn't listen, though. For all his days Cap'n Tip January had been set in his ways and stiff in his convictions and simple but stedfast in his faiths. He said, and stuck to it, that he'd rather slip out than hang on to hobble about on crutches. Besides, his boat was gone and with her gone he didn't have much else to live for. He didn't say that part of it in so many words, but you could add two and two together and figure out how he must have felt about it.

So he went, and the home paper gave him upwards of half a column under the heading, "Another Old-Timer Goes Ashore," and six veterans of his craft—two mates, two masters, a pilot and an engineer—were the pall-bearers.

The doctor who attended him, and pleaded with him to submit to the amputation, was a young man and comparatively a newcomer, named Carr. His practice largely was among the families of the mill-workers and the factory hands. So, to be near his patients, he lived in the upper part of town, and it was there in the crystalline dawn that a messenger came knocking at his door to tell him he was needed and needed right away. He dressed hurriedly and, carrying his surgical kit, he went with the man.

The pair of them trudged through the snow to the

river front. When they came to a blunt little point of land whence they must flounder down the bank, the young physician sucked his breath in. Passing there the day before he had marked how the shore was lined and double-lined with shipping. Now, where the boats had been the great jagged slabs were packed and piled against the desolated scarred bank. It was like looking down upon the splintery cheek of a glacier, or at least he imagined a glacial rampart must have such appearance as this. On beyond, more of these slabs, a countless battalion of them, were wallowing past, grinding and crumbling and making intricate patterns like parts of a vast jigsaw puzzle as they obeyed the pull of the hampered current.

There was need of haste so they didn't tarry long here. But as they girded themselves for a somewhat difficult descent, his guide began telling him certain details. Aiming a mittened hand, he said:

"Right off there, almost opposite to us, is where the poor old Promised Land sunk. See that black lump-like close in at the near edge of all that floatin' stuff? Well, that's one of her stacks stickin' up."

"But I thought you just told me she was tied up over alongside the island?"

"Oh, she was. And if she'd been layin' a little further down this way she'd likely be in good enough shape still. You see, when that last blizzard of two weeks ago put her out of commission, the whole inside bank over across from us was already filled with those big fleets out of the Mississippi and the upper Ohio that make a regular business of winterin' here. There wasn't any place left for her exceptin' up near the far end yonder.

"So about two hours ago when the main drift swung back this direction after tryin' to push out toward the Illinois side, the boats further down the island mostly escaped. The big damage was done on this side, as you'll notice. But the three or four boats at the head of the row caught the full force of it and didn't have a chance. Iron chains couldn't have held 'em, let alone Manila ropes. They were either chopped down at their moorin's or else they fetched loose and headed this way until the ice chewed 'em up.

"By all accounts, the Promised Land was the third to go. And that's where Cap'n Tip showed he was a real steamboatman. Yes, suh, right to the last he showed it. For one thing, he made Dave Ripley—that's his second engineer—stick to the job. Dave owned up to me 'while ago that he was crazy to quit her and take his chances on the ice same as the niggers was, but old Tip wouldn't let 'em. He just browbeat 'em into stayin' with her and that's why they're alive this mornin'. And he took the wheel himself and somehow he managed to jockey her along almost to this bank.

"Yes, suh, he nursed her along sort of diagonal, until her wheel was torn off and the ice pinched in on her and crushed her hull; and then, as she careened, they tell me that a regular mountain of ice hit her broadside and cut the upper works right off of her, clean and smooth as shavin' your face. But by then the cap'n had 'em all herded out on the bow where they could jump for solid ice. But he wouldn't let 'em jump till he gave the word, which also was mighty lucky for them.

"But it wasn't so lucky for this stranger—Crenshaw,

or whatever his name was—the little preacher I've been tellin' you about comin' along, that Cap'n January had aboard with him for some personal reason of his own. Because he missed his footin' and slid off through a crack, and in he dropped in deep water. He never came up but once and then his head only showed for just a second, but Dave Ripley says he was lookin' right at him and he swears, Dave does, that he had a smile on his face as he went under—yes, suh, a happy smile. That's one of the things that seems to have stuck in Dave's mind."

"But wasn't it too dark to see distinctly?"

"Oh, the cap'n was holdin' a lantern up high, so's they could tell where they were goin'. Seems like he thought of everything. He would have been the last one to make the jump. But when the preacher-man slipped and tumbled back, January, instead of followin' the others, just flung the lantern aside and dived right into that ice-cold water, grabbin' for him.

"He missed his first grab, though, and before he could make another some heavy chunks of ice that were forced down underneath the surface, closed in on his legs—the way he's hurt proves that—and just bit into him clear to the bone, the same as a shark or an alligator. But Dave Ripley and one of the niggers—a little old white-headed humpback nigger that's been workin' for January nobody knows how long—they turned back and they both dropped flat on the ice and stretched out their arms and someway they dragged him free, although they must have mangled him still worse doin' it.

"I saw that part of it myself. I heard 'em yellin' and I scrambled along the bank from my watchman's

shanty yonder." He pointed again toward a tiny one-room building which they were nearing. "So I helped 'em tote him in there, and we tied up his legs the best we could to check the bleedin' and built up a big fire in my stove, and by that time the daylight was startin' to come, and I put out to find a doctor. But it seemed like I was forever findin' you. I only hope it ain't too late.

"Curious thing, though, he didn't seem to be sufferin' any. Up to the time I left him he didn't seem to feel the least mite of pain. He was the ca'mest one of us all."

"The shock would probably make him insensible to pain for a while," explained Dr. Carr puffingly. "Sort of put the nerves to sleep for the time being. Then, too, he'd been plunged into icy water."

"It struck me as mighty curious though, him bein' so quiet and so rational. Why, after we got him stretched out on the floor and that old nigger was kneelin' down and holdin' his boss's head in his arms —the nigger acts like he's plum' distracted himself— Dave Ripley stooped over, half cryin', with his wet clothes freezin' on him, and tried to tell him how grateful they all felt to him; and he looked up at Dave and he says: 'Well, son,' he says, and kind of grinned sayin' it, 'I had to take a matter of three or four lives when I wuz consider'ble younger. Ef I helped save four lives tonight, like you're claimin', mebbe that'll sort of balance the books fur me.'

"And right after that he says: ' 'Twasn't the old Tennessee done my boat dirt. Remember that, boys. Ef the Ohio had let that ice through by the upper outlet the way it wanted to go, we'd 'a' been all right. So

don't let's blame our own river, that's give us a livin' all these years,' he says. Talkin' about a river not bein' to blame in a minute like that! It certainly sounded curious to me. . . . Well, doc, here we are and, I say it again, I hope we ain't too late. Spite of all we could do he was still losin' a sight of blood when I left."

As Dr. Carr subsequently said, it might not have been too late either except for the wounded man's obstinacy. He offered strong argument to support his professional opinion; the little group in the shanty who heard him could testify to that, and did. His first job, though, was to give the victim stimulant for his heart and bind on proper tourniquets. Dave Ripley's overcoat, covering the maimed limbs, was soaked with a darker fluid than river water.

Squatting by the lean shape that lay face upward on the wooden floor, the head being cradled in a shivering, sobbing darky's wet arms, Carr finally told the patient flat out just what the inevitable consequences of a further refusal to undergo an immediate operation must be.

"Very well then, captain," he added when the answer had been made, "if that's your decision there's nothing else I can do except to stay with you and make —it—a little easier for you. But once more I warn you, you can't last long."

"Much oblige' all the same, doc," said Cap'n January. "Ef it ain't puttin' you out too much, I'd sort of like to have you here along with any of these other boys that keer to stay by me."

"Hadn't I better send one of them for a minister of the Gospel?"

"No, we won't do that neither. I've managed to git along this fur without leanin' on any special creed, havin' a sort of little private doctrine of my own. Besides, I had the company of a preacher nearly all night. You know about him?"

Carr nodded, and the dying man smiled up at him and said:

"That there little gropin', wanderin' Yankee preacher! Sorry hand at preachin' but clean strain all the way through; anybody could tell that. Doc, I'm goin' to let you in on a little secret. It's troublin' me some now—not much though. Ef, in His mercy, God lets me go to the same place whar I know that preacher's already gone, I'll mebbe have some explainin' to do. I'll have to own up and tell him that I played a trick on him.

"He went to glory thinkin' he'd made three converts. He didn't have no idea that they cost me thirty dollars cash. That's whut it come to, gittin' them fellers to let on like they'd been stirred up by his preachin'—ten dollars a head. I done it fur the best, though. He wuz gittin' ready to quit, and that would 'a' been bad fur him. I done it fur the best.

"I hope I git a chance to explain it to him jest how it wuz. Or mebbe I won't need to; mebbe they've already told him Up Yonder. Or mebbe, bein' kind and merciful, They won't see fitten ever to tell him. I hope not anyway!"

He said no more on this score. He said very little more on any score, for shortly, and all at once, he weakened and began sinking. About the time he lost consciousness he did speak a few words—short separated sentences.

Dr. Carr heard what was said but, being of an agnostic turn as many of his trade are apt to be, did not agree with one other hearer—a weeping, ignorant, elderly darky—that these words might have any special significance, any real portent. It was Dr. Carr's experience that in the delirium preceding the end expiring patients were apt to relive the immediate past.

In any event, Cap'n January, after several times muttering, "The Promised Land, the Promised Land," suddenly called out in the tone of one giving a command: "There's a hail fur me! Stand by, niggers, fur the landin'!" and then, just after that, in a surprisingly clear round voice: "Why, hello, elder!"

THE END